

Sacred Texts of the World

Course Guidebook

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Sacred Texts of the World

Scope:

Religious texts are, in many cases, the best way to learn about the faith traditions of others. Authoritative and widely available, they offer a window into a new world of ideas and practices. In our rapidly shrinking world, where cultural traditions are converging at an ever-increasing rate, the value of mutual understanding cannot be overstated.

But it would be far too simple to suggest that we can easily discover some universal truth or common ground by a cursory read of another faith's sacred writings. These texts exhibit tremendous variety in content, form, use, and origins. We must approach these texts with an open mind and great care. In so doing, we may find that we learn as much about ourselves and our own beliefs as we do about others'.

The library of world scriptures is huge, and sacred texts can be studied and pondered for a lifetime. Thus, this course will focus on a specific selection of texts. The course provides an overview of the sacred writings of seven major religious traditions, basically in chronological order of the religions' founding, along with descriptions of holy books from another half dozen lesser-known or smaller faiths.

We begin by discussing how to approach reading these texts, then start our journey with the sacred works of the Hindus. Among the many great opportunities here will be a chance to broaden the definition of *text*, for many of these texts defy Western ideas about scripture. We will also look at the related faith of Sikhism, whose relatively recent sacred text occupies a unique role in world religions.

Next, we will study Jewish scripture, including the Tanakh (also called the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament by Christians), the Apocrypha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. We will look at the formerly oral traditions now written down in the Mishnah and Talmud, and we will see why the Jewish relationship to their scripture rightly earns them the title "people of the

book.” Before moving on, we will also consider the ancient Near Eastern monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism; its text, the Avesta; and some interesting parallels between this faith and the three great Abrahamic faiths.

The Buddhist canon is the largest in the world, containing about 100,000 pages. We will consider the Tripitaka, or “Three Baskets,” of the Buddhist scriptural tradition: the Vinaya (rules for monks and nuns), the Suttas (discourses of the Buddha), and the Abhidharma (works of systematic philosophy) from all of the major Buddhist traditions. After this, we will look at the Jain faith, which arose in a similar time and place as Buddhism. This faith is in the unique position of sharing many of its core principles among its different sects but not sharing its core scriptures.

Confucianism is often thought of as a philosophy rather than a religion, but its texts discuss morality, principles for living in harmony with the universe, rituals for dealing with unseen beings, divination, and temple ceremonies, much like the other scriptures in this course. We will see, however, that although the contents of the Confucian Classics are much like that of other scriptures, their uses are rather different, with a decidedly this-worldly, even political, focus.

Daoism is another great faith of Chinese origin, and its history is entwined with that of Confucianism. Its most famous text, the Daodejing, is fairly well known in the West, but it is only a small section of a much larger canon with a complicated history of development.

We will consider both of these traditions, then turn to Japan for a brief look at two of its native faiths, Shinto and Tenrikyo. One has no official scripture beyond the ancient histories of Japan; the other is a modern faith based in the ideas and the beautiful poetry of its founder.

To most students of this course, Christian scriptures will be among the most familiar, either as part of their faith’s own tradition or through the deep influence of these scriptures on Western literature. We will attempt, however, to view these works through fresh eyes as we consider the development and canonization of the Gospels, the letters of Paul and the audience who first read them, and the Apocryphal and Gnostic books that did not make it into

the orthodox Christian canon. Then we will look at a late attempt to expand the Christian canon through the addition of the Book of Mormon.

Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the complete and final revelation of God, but it is not the only Muslim text we will consider in this course. In addition to this central and most revered text of Islam, we will look at the legal interpretations of Islamic law passed down through the Hadith, as well as the mystical poetry of Sufism. We will also look at the Baha'i faith, a 19th-century religion that came out of the context of Shia Islam and has its own unique scriptures.

We will end the course with some unusual cases and questions. First, we will ask what happens to a sacred text when the religion it represents is no longer practiced; specifically, we will consider two cases: the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Mayan Popol Vuh. We will next ask whether explicitly secular writing can take on aspects of the sacred by looking at the place of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in American culture. Finally, we will close with a consideration of how the comparative study of sacred texts might make a difference in our lives as individuals, as members of faith communities, and as citizens of the world. ■

Reading Other People's Scriptures

Lecture 1

The texts we will discuss in these lectures matter a great deal to a great many people. They have been read and reread, loved and revered for centuries or millennia. People have lived by the books we will discuss and, as we'll see, have sometimes been willing to risk death to preserve them. The library of world scriptures is huge, and in most cases, we come to it as outsiders. But this course provides an overview of the scriptures of seven major religious traditions, as well as holy books of some smaller faiths, in the hope that our study will bring us new insight into global thought, politics, and culture and new wisdom to apply in our own lives.

Preserving Sacred Texts

- Imagine a world in which the printing press had never been invented, where the only books were those that had been painstakingly copied out by hand. How many books would you own, particularly if you had to copy them out yourself? Many people would have only the texts they consider sacred.
- Or from a slightly different perspective, if there were a fire, which books would you try to save? History shows us that this isn't always a hypothetical question.
 - On October 23, 1731, the great classical scholar Richard Bentley was staying at Ashburnham House in London, where the royal library had recently been relocated. About 2:00 am, he awoke to the smell of smoke and jumped out of bed to try to put out a fire that had started near a chimney.
 - As the flames rapidly spread and the paneling caught fire, Bentley ran upstairs and grabbed the Codex Alexandrinus before he escaped the burning building.
 - This book, written in the 5th century, is one of the three earliest and most important manuscripts we have of the complete

Greek Bible (the New Testament plus the Septuagint). The early version of the New Testament that is in the Codex Alexandrinus has been crucial to establishing the most accurate Greek text possible.

- Such tales of sacred texts that have survived through the centuries, sometimes through extraordinary efforts and sacrifices, are not rare. The burning-house scenario is common enough that a section of the Jewish Talmud is devoted to the question of whether it is lawful to rescue sacred writings from a fire on the Sabbath.
- And accidental fires aren't the only concern. From 175 to 183 C.E., teams of carvers in China inscribed the Confucian classics on stone tablets, in part to prevent the repetition of an incident that had taken place 400 years earlier. At that time, the first emperor of China had ordered the destruction of all Confucian writings in private hands and threatened execution for any scholars who persisted in teaching them.
- Most of the Confucian classics survived the first emperor, which is different from the fate of the Zoroastrian sacred texts, most of which were lost in the fires of Persepolis that were set when Alexander the Great invaded Persia in 330 B.C.E. Even today, Zoroastrians lament that they have to make do with fragments of the scriptures that were collected during the Sassanid Empire (c. 3rd century C.E.), which consist of only about one quarter of their original holy writings.

Why Study Scriptures?

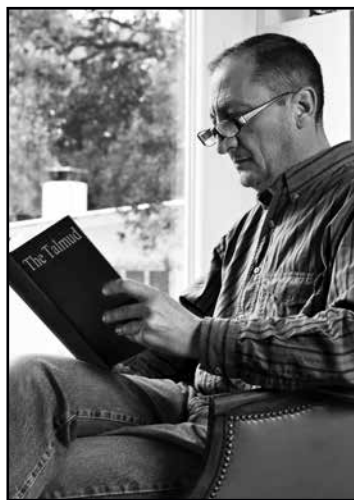
- For believers, sacred texts from their own belief systems promise ultimate truth or salvation of some sort. They tell readers how to connect with the divine and offer guidelines for living or even commandments that should not be ignored. But what if you're not a believer in a particular religion? What might be in such texts for you? And why focus on scripture in the first place?
 - There's no question that religion is a significant part of the lives of most people around the world; thus, studying various belief systems offers an important window into understanding global

politics, thought, and culture. In order to understand others, we need some sense of how they see themselves in relation to the cosmos and tradition and other people—and those relationships are often defined by religion.

- Yet religion encompasses much more than just scripture. It includes ritual; ceremonies; such practices as meditation, yoga, or humanitarian service; ecclesiastical organizations; formal theology; sacred spaces and artifacts; ethical codes; a community of fellow believers; and so forth. Why devote a course to scripture?
- We can provide four short answers to this question, the first of which is accessibility. As wonderful as it might be to visit a Zen monastery in Japan, or to observe a pilgrimage in India, or to take part in Holy Week celebrations in Israel, realistically, only a few of us have those opportunities. Sacred texts, by contrast, are readily available in bookstores, libraries, and on the Internet.
- The second reason for studying scriptures is centrality. In most cases, sacred writings communicate core values and beliefs about a religion; sometimes, they are the glue that holds a religion together. For instance, there are several types of modern Judaism, but they all share a reverence for the Torah; Sunni and Shia Muslims all recite the Qur'an; the hundreds of Protestant denominations and subdenominations are united in their reliance on the Bible; and the diverse communities of Hindus look to the Vedas as their most authoritative texts.
- The third reason is comparability. It's true that some religions do not have sacred written texts; instead, they may have oral traditions that are passed down by religious specialists. In fact, most of the scriptures of the larger world religions started as oral traditions that were eventually transcribed into written form. But written texts are, of course, easier to study and compare side by side.
 - For instance, we can investigate the role played by poetry, historical narrative, or law codes in various scriptures. With

printed translations of sacred texts, we can more easily discern the themes, insights, and anxieties that characterize various religious communities.

- Not all religions use scriptures in the same way, and there is remarkable variety in the types of writings that people hold sacred and the sizes of various canons, but at least written texts give us some common basis for comparison.
- It is easy to be overwhelmed by the religious diversity of humankind throughout history, but scripture gives us some common ground from which to start a conversation.
- Finally, there is wisdom to be found in sacred texts, even for those who come to a particular scripture as outsiders. These books have survived because people have found them useful, and they frequently offer novel insights or call attention to universal truths.
 - For instance, reading the Bhagavad Gita and its teachings about acting without attachment to the fruit of actions can make us think more deeply about how much self-interest lies at the heart of what we do. Confucian texts can help us appreciate the degree to which our identities come from our relationships with others.
 - Note, however, that we can't think of world scriptures as merely books of quotations. Biblical



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Ideally, reading other people's scriptures should be more like a window than a mirror; rather than confirming our own assumptions, it should show us ideas we haven't seen before.

scholars warn us about the dangers of proof texting—that is, taking a verse out of context to support a point. It's much better to look at scriptural passages in context, to try to understand what the authors had in mind and how believers have interpreted them over the centuries.

Thoreau's Dream

- There has never been a better time for cross-cultural, inter-religious explorations than right now. We can compare our situation to that of an earlier American who was curious about sacred texts from around the world, Henry David Thoreau.
 - From 1845 to 1847, Thoreau lived in a one-room cabin at Walden Pond. He had only few books with him, mostly Greek and Latin classics but also an English translation of the Bhagavad Gita, and he expressed an interest in the Hindu Vedas and the Zoroastrian Avesta, as well.
 - While living at Walden, Thoreau wrote a memoir of a canoe trip he had taken a few years earlier called *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In this book, he shared a fond dream or ambition: “It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations. ... Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of men.”
- Thoreau was a bit too early, but his dream was realized about a half century later when Oxford University published the 50-volume series *Sacred Books of the East*. It was a groundbreaking scholarly project, with translations of the most significant sacred texts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Islam. And all of it is available online today (www.sacred-texts.com).
- Because these are early translations, they're not always as readable or as well organized as we might hope, but the point is that we have at our fingertips everything Thoreau imagined. The trick is knowing where to start, because many of these texts can seem puzzling or

strange at first glance. This course is a guide to launch you on a study of these scriptures.

The Benefits of Our Study

- If you approach the study of scripture as a skeptic or an agnostic, you can, like a naturalist, marvel at the variety and creativity of our human species. You may gain an appreciation of what these texts mean to believers and, perhaps, better understand why they have gone to such efforts to preserve, translate, disseminate, and interpret the writings they hold sacred.
- If you are already committed to one of the religious traditions we will survey, you may enjoy learning how people throughout history have made sense of the universe through sacred texts. Through the concerns, critiques, and questions of these historical figures, you may come to see your own tradition with fresh eyes.
 - One of the drawbacks of being religious is that reading your own scriptures is most often a case of rereading. You get comfortable, perhaps even complacent, in hearing the same words again and again. Yet the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had a point when he observed that people who want to truly open themselves to a sacred text “must take up scripture as if they had never seen it.”
 - And that, of course, is exactly what we do when we look at other people’s holy books. It’s a good reminder of the time when our own scriptural traditions were new to us.
 - Once you’ve had a chance to stretch your mind a bit, to step outside your own faith community, then you can return to your familiar scriptures with new questions and see things in a new light, from a broader perspective.

Suggested Reading

Feiser and Powers, eds., *Scriptures of the World's Religions*.

Gernet, "Christian and Chinese Visions of the World in the Seventeenth Century" (on Zhang Chao and Christianity).

Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture*.

Novak, ed., *The World's Wisdom*.

Smart and Hecht, eds., *Sacred Texts of the World*.

Smith, *What Is Scripture?*

Van Voorst, ed., *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why is studying sacred texts a good introduction to world religions?
2. What would Henry David Thoreau have thought about a course like this one?

Hinduism and the Vedas

Lecture 2

If you come to the study of sacred texts from a Judeo-Christian background, you probably have a certain concept of “scripture”: Such texts are written books that claim some sort of divine origin; they tell us about the life or ideas of the founder of the religion; they are considered especially sacred and authoritative by believers; and so on. But one of the interesting things about studying world religions is that it gives us an opportunity to rethink our assumptions, and most of what we think about scriptures doesn’t apply to the sacred texts of Hinduism. In fact, as we’ll see, the Vedas—the holiest and most powerful scriptures in the Hindu tradition—seem to break all these rules.

Ideas about Scripture

- In a Judeo-Christian conception, “scripture” has certain attributes: First, it refers to a written book that claims some sort of divine origin. Such texts tell us something about the life or ideas of the founder of the religion and are considered especially sacred and authoritative by believers, who study and consult them regularly for guidance and wisdom. Finally, scriptures serve as a source of doctrine for the religion, defining beliefs and revealing truths about the universe.
- Interestingly, most of these assumptions about scripture don’t apply to the sacred texts of Hinduism.
 - Rather than a single book of scripture, Hindus have hundreds of sacred texts, and they have traditionally valued oral rather than literary transmission. Their holiest compositions, the Vedas, were thought to be too sacred to put into written form; instead, they were memorized by ritual specialists, the Brahman priests.
 - There is no founder of Hinduism. In fact, the term “Hindu” itself was created by Westerners in the 18th century to refer to the many religious beliefs and practices of people living in the

Indian subcontinent. What we term “Hinduism” encompasses a tremendous variety of beliefs, rituals, and deities, but there is no single person who started it all.

- Some parts of the Hindu canon are considered more sacred than others; oddly enough, the Bhagavad Gita, probably the most beloved and widely read Hindu scripture, is not in the most sacred category of Hindu texts. In addition, there isn’t a strict boundary between scripture and commentary.
- Sacred texts are important in Hinduism, but they are not central to the religion in the way that the Bible is in Judaism or Christianity; in fact, ordinary Hindus are familiar with but don’t generally read the scriptures. Many believers consider taking part in festivals, pilgrimages, the worship of icons or images, devotional offerings, and hospitality or the performance of one’s duty to family and community as more important to religious life than scriptures.
- Perhaps the strangest thing about Hindu scripture from a Western perspective is that the Vedas—the holiest and most powerful scriptures in the tradition—don’t convey much cognitive information. The content matters less than their ritual function. They are chanted in an ancient language that even the priests who are performing the ceremony may not understand. They don’t tell about the gods so much as directly connect believers with divinity or with the harmonious order of the universe.

Basic Framework of Hindu Sacred Texts

- The key distinction in Hindu sacred texts is between Shruti (“What Is Heard”) and Smriti (“What Is Remembered”). Shruti—basically, the Vedas—is considered to have been revealed. (The Vedas consist of four collections of hymns known as the Samhitas, along with their oldest commentaries, the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads.) Ancient sages called *rishis* (“seers”) perceived these mantras (“sacred syllables”) resonating through the cosmos and passed them on to their disciples orally. According to some Hindus,

the Vedas were written by God; others hold that they are eternal and uncreated.

- The oldest of the four Samhitas, the Rig Veda (“Knowledge of the Verses”), dates to perhaps 1500 B.C.E. and consists of 1,028 hymns, divided into 10 books. The poems are addressed to various gods and were meant to be chanted as an accompaniment to rituals or fire sacrifices.
 - The Sama Veda (“Knowledge of the Chants”) includes songs and melodies used in sacrifices, with words mostly taken from the Rig Veda and instructions on their recitation.
 - The Yajur Veda (“Knowledge of the Ritual Directions”) has prose formulas and prayers chanted by priests in rituals.
 - The Atharva Veda (“Knowledge of the Atharvans [Priests]”) consists of incantations and magical spells to ward off evil spirits and illnesses, to gain a husband or a wife, or to prevent miscarriages and charms to speak when one is building a house, going into battle, worried about crops or family arguments, or even gambling. This last Veda is the latest—dating to perhaps 800 B.C.E.—and is not considered quite as authoritative as the other three.
- Each of the four Samhitas is associated with texts called Brahmanas (ritual handbooks); Aranyakas, or “Wilderness Books”, which are explanations of symbolism and the inner meaning of ritual; and Upanishads (meaning “sitting near” [the teacher]), which are philosophical expositions of such concepts as *atman* (the soul) and *brahman* (ultimate reality). The Upanishads form the basis of Hindu philosophy, and with them, we finally get an emphasis on ideas and knowledge rather than ritual.
 - Altogether, the four Vedas (Samhitas plus their three collections of associated texts) make up the Shruti.

- The second major category is Smriti, “What Is Remembered.” These texts were produced after the Vedas and are thought to have been written by humans, but they are nevertheless inspired.
 - Although they are not as holy or as authoritative as the Vedas, these texts have probably played a more important role in the everyday lives of Hindus for the last 2,500 years.
 - The Smriti include the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (200 B.C.E.–400 C.E.); the Dharma-shastras (200–300 C.E.), regulations for everyday living; and the Puranas (400–1000 C.E.), myths and legends about the gods.

Gayatri Mantra and the Vedas

- Every morning at dawn and every evening at twilight, millions of Hindus recite the Gayatri mantra, an invocation to the three realms of earth, atmosphere, and sky.
 - The meaning of the mantra is something like: “We meditate on the adorable glory of the radiant sun; may he inspire our intelligence,” with an implication that sun equals light, which equals knowledge, which equals consciousness.
 - But the mantra is always recited in Sanskrit, a language not spoken in India today. As Professor of Religion Robert Lester explains, giving voice to the ancient syllables, “harmonizes the body, mind, and spirit with the physical worlds and the primal, universal forces.”
 - The Gayatri mantra has been known as the “mother of Veda,” and it was taught to young upper-caste males as part of the ceremony that began their study of the Vedas.
- In traditional India, there were four major castes: Brahmans, priests/teachers; Kshatriyas, warriors/rulers; Vaishyas, farmers/merchants; and Shudras, laborers/servants. (The so-called untouchables, now referred to as Dalits, were without caste.) Only the three highest castes were allowed to participate in Vedic religion because they claimed descent from the Indo-Aryan migrants that came to India

around 1500 B.C.E.—the originators of the Vedas—and only they could study the Vedas (though Brahmins were the specialists).

- The Vedas were in existence for more than 1,000 years before they were written down, and for the next two millennia they were still mainly transmitted orally from teacher to student, because transcribing the sacred words was thought to diminish their power or even to be sacrilegious.
- The Brahmins took their duties seriously and jealously guarded the sacred words that had been entrusted to them. There were, however, Hindu reform movements in the 19th century that encouraged all Hindus to recite the Gayatri mantra, regardless of caste or gender, and that practice has continued to the present.
- Even now, although most Hindus would describe the Vedas as their most sacred scriptures, they probably don't know much about their contents, because the Vedas are hardly ever encountered apart from ritual functions, in which they are always chanted in Sanskrit.

Contents of the Rig Veda

- Scholars of religion sometimes talk about the “Protestant bias,” that is, looking at other faiths through the lens of the Christian Reformation: assuming that scriptures are at the heart of a religion, that the oldest texts represent its purest form, and that those documents can best be understood through textual criticism, historical analysis, and translation. This approach may give us a somewhat skewed view of Hinduism.
 - Still, the pioneering Protestant scholars of the 19th century, particularly Max Müller (1823–1900), did amazing work in building bridges and promoting inter-religious understanding.
 - Müller, a German religious scholar, worked for 24 years to produce the first scholarly edition of the Sanskrit Rig Veda, using only handwritten manuscripts. Such devotion to other people's sacred texts is admirable, even if the European approach was foreign to Hinduism.

Selections from the Rig Veda

Hymn to Agni:

I extol Agni, the household priest, the divine minister of the sacrifice, the chief priest, the bestower of blessings.

May that Agni, who is to be extolled by ancient and modern seers, conduct the gods here.

Through Agni may one gain day by day wealth and welfare which is glorious and replete with heroic sons.

(1.1; Embree, 9)

Hymn to Soma:

I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it honey. ...

We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. What can hatred and the malice of a mortal do to us now, O immortal one?

(8.48; Doniger, 134)

- Burial Hymn:
- Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods. I say to you who have eyes, who have ears: do not injure our children or our men. ...
- Open up, Earth [for ashes]; do not crush him ... wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt.
- (10:18; Doniger, 52–53)

- The Rig Veda consists of 1,028 hymns, divided into 10 books. Most of these are praises and petitions to the gods; references to myths; and hymns addressed to the sky and earth, storm gods, solar gods, and the components of sacrifices. There are also injunctions to moral behavior and touching burial hymns. The hymns in the 10th book tend to address more universal or philosophical themes.
 - Some of the hymns from this book concern creation, but these seem to be contradictory. Sometimes, the universe comes from sacred speech, nonexistence, a mother goddess, or a primordial giant who was sacrificed; there is a hymn that suggests that even the creator himself may not know exactly how it happened.
 - The fact that most English anthologies include some of these hymns about the origins of the cosmos is another example of Protestant bias. We care about creation stories because the Bible starts with a dramatic example, and we're curious about other people's beliefs on this issue.
- It's important to keep in mind that when we read translations of sacred texts, looking for bits of wisdom or beauty or poignancy, we are doing something that is rather foreign to the texts themselves. Analyzing and discussing the meaning of specific passages might seem natural in an academic lecture series, yet for Hindus, the Vedas are not supposed to be understood cognitively so much as experienced in a traditional setting of sound, color, fragrance, movement, and devotion.

Suggested Reading

Denny and Taylor, eds., *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*.

Doniger, trans., *The Rig Veda*.

Edgerton, trans., *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy*.

Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*.

Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*.

Holm, ed., *Sacred Writings*.

Mittal and Thursby, eds., *The Hindu World*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the two major categories of Hindu sacred texts?
2. Why did the Hindus value oral over written scriptures?
3. How are the Vedas different from scriptures in the Judeo-Christian tradition?

What Is Heard—Upanishads

Lecture 3

In the last lecture, we talked about the broad category of Hindu sacred texts known as Shruti—"What Is Heard." These revered texts were known as the four Vedas; each begins a Samhita, used primarily in rituals and sacrifices. Eventually, the sacred sounds of the archaic Sanskrit hymns became more important than the meaning, and exact instructions for performing the rituals, called Brahmanas, along with some speculations about their religious significance, the Aranyakas, were attached to the Samhitas and became components of the Vedas and, thus, Shruti. The latest stage in the development of Shruti came with texts known as the Upanishads. These compositions, also memorized and transmitted orally for many centuries, consist of explorations and elaborations of key themes in the Vedas.

European Interest in Indian Culture

- The beginnings of European scholarship on Indian culture came in the 18th century, when the British East India Company took over large portions of the Asian subcontinent, starting with Bengal in the northeast.
 - Sir William Jones was a British civil servant in Bengal with an astonishing facility in languages. In 1786, Jones gave a lecture noting distinctive similarities among Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, and he suggested that they were related as descendants of an earlier language that later scholars would call Indo-European. It was a startling hypothesis that turned out to be correct.
 - Most European languages, along with Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindi, belong to the Indo-European language family, which means that English is more closely related to Sanskrit than, say, Japanese is to Chinese. In Jones's time, it also meant that studying the ancient texts of India might yield clues to the origins of European culture.

- In 1818, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, “I anticipate that the influence of Sanskrit literature will not be less profound than the revival of Greek in the fourteenth century,” and he asserted that the best way to understand his own philosophy was to start with the Upanishads. But not many Europeans had read them in 1818, much less the older Samhitas, which hadn’t yet been translated.
 - The archaic language of the Samhitas was difficult, and most of the few manuscripts that were available were in poor condition.
 - In addition, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, another British civil servant in Bengal and one of the few Europeans with enough Sanskrit to have dipped into the Samhitas, warned his colleagues that what they contained was not rewarding.
 - A few excerpts of the Samhitas were published in the 1830s, but full translations would have to await the efforts of Müller and others in the late 19th century.
- By contrast, the Upanishads had long been important in Indian philosophy, and Europeans had a shortcut to them. In 1657, a Muslim Mughal prince in India named Dara Shikoh had produced a Persian translation of 50 Upanishads. A century later, in 1755, the French adventurer and scholar Abraham Anquetil Duperron came across two copies of the Persian version, which he translated into Latin and published in 1801.
- There was a German translation from Sanskrit in 1832, followed by an English rendition in 1853. Müller himself published a careful translation of 12 Upanishads as two volumes of his *Sacred Books of the East* series in 1879 and 1884. In his introduction, Müller defended the value of Asian scriptures while trying to temper the unreasonable enthusiasm of those who assumed they were full of ancient wisdom and eternal truths.

Overview of the Upanishads

- The first Upanishads date from about 700 B.C.E. There are generally thought to be 108 classic Upanishads, all composed within a 1,000-year period, but there are now more than 200 texts that are considered by at least some Hindus to be Upanishads. In this collection, 12 or 13 Upanishads are regarded as the most important and authoritative.
- The Upanishads feature some sort of instruction, often a dialogue between a teacher and student or a debate or lecture; these pedagogical interactions sometimes include gods and women. The word “Upanishad” literally means “sitting by the side of”; thus, this is the sort of transmission of wisdom that eager students would have wanted to overhear.
- The earliest of the Upanishads are prose collections of miscellaneous materials, while the later principal Upanishads are verse compositions with a devotional focus. They are all suggestive and exploratory rather than definitive about their ideas.
- Two Upanishads are considered to be the earliest—the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya; they are the longest, as well.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

- Book I of the Brihadaranyaka begins with a cosmic reinterpretation of the horse sacrifice, one of the most elaborate and prestigious rituals in ancient India, which could be undertaken only by a king.
 - It is doubtful that this ritual was performed very often, but the Brihadaranyaka invites listeners to view it in metaphorical terms, as something to be meditated on rather than physically enacted. It begins with a chapter imagining the world as a sacrificial horse, in which dawn is the horse’s head; the sun, its eye; the wind, its breath; and so on.
 - This sort of microcosmic/macrocosmic thinking is common in the Upanishads, where connections are drawn between

something close at hand and the larger universe, though the microcosm is more often the worshipper's own body.

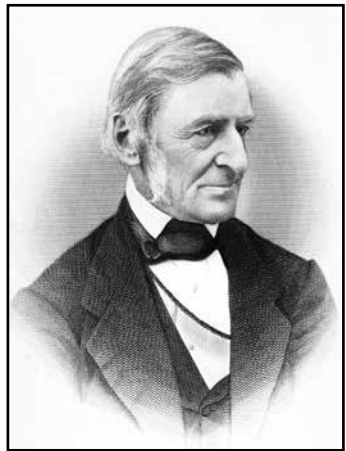
- Some scholars have suggested that the main issue seems to be control; by learning to control one's mind through meditation or one's breathing and bodily positions (as in Yoga), humans can put themselves in harmony with the cosmos and gain power over things that otherwise would be beyond us, such as a good harvest, the gods, or life and death.
- After the passage reinterpreting the horse sacrifice, the Brihadaranyaka moves to various stories of creation and discussions of how humans are connected to the gods and the natural world. Two key terms here are *brahman* (ultimate reality) and *atman* (the self or soul). The great mystery to be realized is that *atman* is *brahman*. Our individuality is an illusion; at a deeper level, we are one with the universe.
- Book II follows with a dialogue in which a king teaches a Brahman priest about *brahman*.
 - The king uses a concept that will reappear several times in the Upanishads, that there are four modes of consciousness: wakefulness (ordinary life), dreaming (which seems real but is an illusion), dreamless sleep (loss of one's sense of self), and pure consciousness (beyond the other three, in which one merges with *brahman*).
 - A later Upanishad analyzes the sacred syllable *Om* as comprised of three sounds—*a*, *u*, *m*—each of which represents one of the first three modes of consciousness, and the silence that follows as a manifestation of *brahman*, the oneness of the universe.
- We next hear the story of the sage Yajnavalkya, who is asked by one of his wives to teach her the knowledge that leads to immortality. He explains that *atman* and *brahman* are identical; there is ultimately no difference between self and other.

- In Book III, Yajnavalkya debates eight teachers about the meaning of ritual, the number of gods, life and death, and *brahman* and *atman*. In Book IV, he discusses with a king several mistaken ideas about *brahman*, as well as what happens at the moment of death and reincarnation.
 - The idea of reincarnation, or *samsara*, is a key concept in the Upanishads. People are reborn into better or worse human situations or even as animals, but not randomly. Our next lives are determined by our actions (*karma*), as judged against our duty or moral responsibilities (*dharma*).
 - Those who can free themselves from desires—who understand that they are, in actuality, *brahman*—can escape rebirth and gain immortality by merging with the infinite.
- In Book V, Prajapati, the creator god, teaches his children—gods, humans, and demons—about *brahman*, speech, fire, and breath. Perhaps most memorably, he teaches them “the divine voice that the thunder repeats”: DA DA DA, which is short for *damyata*, *datta*, *dayadhvam*, “Be self-controlled, give [to others], be compassionate.”
- Book VI includes an argument among the bodily functions about which is superior (breath wins), and another teacher/student dialogue, this time about different types of fire and reincarnation. The Brihadaranyaka concludes with several rituals and spells for love, fertility, childbirth, and so on.

Other Upanishads and Their Influence

- The second early, lengthy Upanishad, the Chandogya, is famous for its recounting of a dialogue between a father and his son, in which the father teaches the absolute oneness of *atman* and *brahman* through a series of metaphors—how nectar from many flowers comes together in honey, water in many rivers comes together in the ocean, and so on. After each example, he concludes with the observation, “You are That.”

- The Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads are key texts in Vedanta philosophy. “Vedanta” means “the end of the Vedas” and is a term used to describe the Upanishads as a whole, but it later became the name of the preeminent school of Indian philosophy that emphasized the underlying unity of the universe.
- The 8th-century philosopher Shankara argued that *brahman* is the only thing in existence, eternally and without attributes; everything else is an illusion. But later Upanishads were more devotional and seemed to discuss *brahman* in more personal terms, as if it could be identified with a god.
- Other Indian philosophers found support in the Upanishads for dualism (the idea that individual selves are dependent on *brahman* but not identical to it) and theism, in which liberation from reincarnation comes not from knowledge of ultimate reality but from devotion to a god or goddess who, in return, would save his or her followers.
- One of the most famous of the later Upanishads is the Katha, which tells the story of Nachiketa, a young boy who is granted three wishes by Yama, the god of death. Yama teaches the boy about reincarnation, *atman* and *brahman*, and the importance of meditation, self-discipline, and Yoga.
- In the 19th century, German Idealists, English Romantics, and American Transcendentalists all found the Upanishads electrifying. Later, the great 20th-century poet T.



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Ralph Waldo Emerson retold the story of Nachiketa and Yama in his essay “Immortality.”

S. Eliot titled one section of his poem *The Waste Land* “What the Thunder Said” and included the Sanskrit terms corresponding to DA DA DA from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

- In 19th-century India, at a time when many were feeling the humiliation of British colonialism and imperialism, religious leaders looked to the Upanishads for inspiration as they developed what has been called Neo-Vedanta: the re-creation of Hinduism as a modern, unified, tolerant religion based on the ideals of non-dualism, meditation, and Yoga.
- The Upanishads may or may not speak to your own religious sensibilities, but it’s hard not to empathize with the basic impulse behind them. In the Brihadaranyaka, we hear the plea: “Lead me from the unreal to the real! Lead me from darkness to light! Lead me from death to immortality!”

Suggested Reading

Goodall, trans., *Hindu Scriptures*.

Olivelle, trans., *Upanishads*.

Radhakrishnan, trans., *The Principal Upanishads*.

Roebuck, trans., *The Upanishads*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why were Europeans initially more interested in the Upanishads than in the Vedas?
2. What are the major concepts developed in the Upanishads?

What Is Remembered—Epics

Lecture 4

We've had two lectures on the Hindu sacred texts categorized as Shruti ("What Is Heard"), consisting primarily of the Vedas, including both the Samhitas and Upanishads. These scriptures were the particular concern of the Brahman priests and represented an elite form of the religion, focused on ancient ritual and meditative philosophy. However, ordinary Hindus were more likely to look to Smriti ("What Is Remembered") for guidance in their daily lives. Smriti encompasses a vast body of literature and several key genres: epics, Puranas, and Dharma-shastras. In this lecture, we'll talk about two Hindu epics: the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Defining "Dharma"

- The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are mythic narratives of gods and kings. One thread that runs through both is the idea of dharma. This term can be translated as "sacred duty" or "morally upright behavior," but it's more than that.
- *Dharma* is probably the closest term in traditional India to what we in the West might call "religion," yet it's not just a set of beliefs and practices. Rather, it's a conglomeration of principles that gives meaning and shape to all of life and, indeed, provides order throughout the cosmos.
- The word *dharma* comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "to support or uphold"; eventually, it came to be used to refer to the eternal laws that maintain the world. It is a manifestation of order, harmony, and truth. Although there are universal aspects to dharma, it is not the same for everyone. Your dharma depends, to some degree, on your gender, caste, family situation, and stage in life.

The *Ramayana*

- The *Ramayana*, traditionally ascribed to a poet named Valmiki, appears to have been composed between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., probably by multiple individuals. It's a lengthy epic of about 25,000 verses, divided into seven books.
- The *Ramayana* begins with a framing story, in which the poet Valmiki is commissioned by the creator god Brahma to tell the story of Rama, the king of Kosala.
 - Valmiki does so and then teaches his epic poem to his disciples, especially the twins Lava and Kusha, who spread it far and wide.
 - Eventually, King Rama himself learns of the epic and invites the twins to his court so that he may hear it. Thus, the story is about Rama, and he's also the audience for it.
- What follows is the epic itself. The former king of Kosala appealed to the gods for a son. At the same time, various deities complained to Lord Brahma about a demon or ogre named Ravana, who was oppressing the world. The god Vishnu agreed to take on human form to defeat Ravana and, thus, was born as Rama. In other words, Rama is an avatar of Vishnu.
- As a young man, Rama and his brother Lakshmana take a journey to save a sage from demons. While away from court, they hear of a marriage contest for a woman named Sita who had been found as a baby in a furrow of a plowed field and had been adopted by a king. Rama wins the contest and returns to the capital, Ayodhya, with Sita as his wife.
- Years later, the old king wished to make Rama his successor, but one of his wives intervened, claiming two wishes that she had been promised earlier: to make her own son the heir apparent and to have Rama exiled into the wilderness for 14 years.

- The king is brokenhearted but cannot go back on his word. And Rama is happy to accept exile rather than see his father proven untruthful. Sita and Lakshmana, unable to bear life without Rama, accompany him into the wilderness.
- Here, we see examples of dharma in action—Rama is the perfect son, who sets aside his own feelings and ambitions to obey his father, and Sita shows herself to be the perfect Hindu wife, completely devoted to her husband.
- But there is trouble ahead for this ideal couple. An ogress tries to seduce Rama and Lakshmana, and when she is rebuffed, she complains to her brother Ravana, the 10-headed demon-king of the island kingdom of Lanka. He kidnaps Sita, but Rama learns the identity of her captor. He soon teams up with Hanuman, the monkey-hero to find her.
- Hanuman takes a great leap over the ocean to the island of Lanka, where he finds Sita and offers to carry her back, but she refuses, saying that her husband must rescue her. Then follows a long account of the war between Rama and Ravana, before Ravana is finally defeated and killed.
- Afterward, Rama accuses Sita of having been unfaithful to him with Ravana. She protests that she is innocent and offers to undergo public ordeal by fire to prove it. When she is vindicated, Rama welcomes her as his wife, explaining that he had never doubted her virtue but had to put her to the test to prove her innocence to others. The couple returns in triumph to Ayodhya, and Rama takes the throne. Some versions of the epic end here, but Valmiki's Sanskrit version has one more chapter.
- A few years later, Rama hears that some of his people still doubt Sita's fidelity. Uncomfortable with the uncertainty, Sita decides to leave, even though she is pregnant. She takes refuge with the poet Valmiki and gives birth to twins who grow up to become disciples of the poet: Lava and Kusha.



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The most popular Hindu holiday, Diwali, in part commemorates the lighting of the palace lamps when Rama and Sita returned from exile.

- In other words, Rama's own lost sons are now reciting to him the story of his own life. Rama is joyfully reunited with them and invites Sita to return to the palace.
- Sita, however, calls upon her mother, the goddess Earth, to witness her longstanding devotion and purity; she then descends into the earth as it opens to receive her. Rama is heartbroken until the god Brahma reminds him that he is an incarnation of Vishnu, and he will once again be with his beloved wife in heaven.
- The *Ramayana* has much to say about dharma with regard to gender roles, kingship, family relationships, honor, interactions with the gods, and the place of sacrifice, violence, and even poetry within a well-ordered, harmonious life. The story is also integral to Indian culture.

- Not many Hindus have read the Vedas, but hundreds of millions have read the *Ramayana* in vernacular languages or have seen versions on television or in reenactments. Indeed, Rama is widely worshipped in India (as an avatar of Vishnu).
- Further, Rama's influence is not confined to India. His story has been transformed into beloved national epics in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia. There are Buddhist, Jain, and even Muslim versions of the tale, which can be found throughout South and Southeast Asia in temple architecture, dance, and drama.

The *Mahabharata*

- The *Mahabharata* ("Great Epic of the Bharata War") is much longer, more complicated, and more morally ambiguous than the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* comprises 75,000 to 100,000 verses in 18 books. It is ascribed to the poet Vyasa, who like Valmiki, is both the author of the epic and a character in it.
- This epic has a similar setting to the *Ramayana* and was composed at about the same time (300 B.C.E.–300 C.E.), but it is much darker in tone. It is the story of a family that tears itself apart and, in the process, brings ruins to the whole country.
- The story begins with a king who had two sons. The oldest son, Dhritarashtra, should have been the next ruler, but because he was born blind, the kingdom was given to the younger son, Pandu.
 - Pandu had five sons—or so it seemed, but their actual fathers were gods: Yudhishthira, the son of Dharma personified; Bhima, the strong one; Arjuna, the great archer; and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. These five Pandava brothers are all married to the same woman, Draupadi.
 - When Pandu died, the blind Dhritarashtra became regent, and naturally, his eldest son, Duryodhana, expected to inherit the kingdom, though Yudhishthira, the son of Pandu and the oldest of all the cousins, had a stronger claim.

- The blind king divides the realm in two, but this does not satisfy Duryodhana, who tries to kill the Pandavas and eventually challenges Yudhisthira to a game of dice. Yudhisthira, whose dharma does not allow him to back down from a challenge, loses everything, including his brothers and their wife Draupadi. Ultimately, the losers promise to go into exile for 12 years and remain in disguise for another year, after which time, the winners will hand over the kingdom.
- After the Pandavas fulfill the terms of their agreement, the cousins refuse to give up their kingdom. There seems to be no alternative but war. On the eve of the battle, Arjuna does not want to fight, because he knows that he will be killing relatives, teachers, and friends the next day, but the god Krishna, who is acting as his chariot driver, explains that doing one's duty is required by dharma. (This famous episode is later known as the Bhagavad Gita.) In the 18-day war that follows, nearly everyone on both sides dies.
- The Pandavas are victorious, but peace is still elusive. Several years later, most of their chief allies are slaughtered in a drunken brawl, and Krishna himself is accidentally killed by a hunter. Yudhisthira abdicates the throne, leaving the kingdom to a younger kinsman while he, his four brothers, and Draupadi try to reach Indra's heaven in the Himalayas.
- Along the way, everyone dies except for Yudhisthira and his devoted dog, who turns out to be the god Dharma; they both are taken into Indra's heaven. However, Yudhisthira is shocked to discover his archenemy Duryodhana in heaven, while his four brothers and Draupadi are in hell. He chooses to go to hell to be with his family; the vision then dissolves, and he is told that he has passed the final test. All are reunited in heaven.
- This summary doesn't even begin to touch on the poignancy and richness of this narrative, which includes framing stories, hundreds of subplots and digressions, sacred vows, terrifying curses, and more. The ideal of dharma is constantly sought for

and questioned, as even the heroes make terrible mistakes and the gods themselves encourage humans to act in ways that seem ethically troubling. But the *Mahabharata* offers plenty of material for thinking about the deepest questions of life. One of its constant refrains is: Dharma is subtle.

- If the *Ramayana* is the more beloved of the two epics, the *Mahabharata* is similarly well-known and pervasive throughout India; indeed, Bharat is what Indians call their own country. The *Mahabharata* is a national epic and a work of profound religious devotion and insight. It is not surprising that it is often referred to as the Fifth Veda.

Suggested Reading

Brockington and Brockington, trans., *Rama the Steadfast*.

Dass, Gucharan, *The Difficulty of Being Good*.

Doniger, *The Hindus*.

Goldman et al., trans., *The Ramayana of Valmiki*.

Mittal and Thursby, eds., *The Hindu World*.

Narasimhan, trans., *The Mahabharata*.

Smith, trans., *The Mahabharata*.

Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the basic stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*?
2. Why have these epics become so popular and influential?

Laws of Manu and Bhagavad Gita

Lecture 5

In the sacred texts of Hinduism, the status of the Vedas (including both Samhitas and Upanishads) as Shruti is clear, as is the significance of the epics as Smriti. Then we face hundreds of texts that would probably be classified as Smriti (“What Is Remembered”) but are seen as more or less authoritative by different Hindus. Many of these writings are used in a sectarian fashion by the devotees of various gods and goddesses or by the followers of particular philosophical schools. In this lecture, we’ll get a sense of what’s in the vast Hindu canon, and then we’ll focus on two of the most prominent, influential texts: *The Laws of Manu* and the Bhagavad Gita.

The Hindu Canon

- At about the time the Upanishads were composed (700 B.C.E.–300 C.E.), other texts attempted to synthesize Vedic lore in a systematic fashion. These become known as Vedanga (“limbs of the Vedas”), and they covered six topics: etymology, grammar, phonetics, meter, astronomy, and ritual. Often, these texts took the form of sutras—series of short aphorisms that were meant to be memorized and that could sometimes be cryptic without the guidance of a teacher or commentary.
- Somewhat later texts known as shastras were also treatises devoted to specialized topics. Thus, the Dharma-sutras (rules for moral, appropriate behavior) of 300 to 100 B.C.E. were followed by Dharma-shastras, beginning about 100 C.E. Dharma was considered one of the three aims of life appropriate for Hindus, along with *artha* (worldly success) and *kama* (enjoyments).
- Later still came the Puranas (“ancient texts”), which are lengthy collections of myth and legends about the gods and ancient sages. There are 18 major Puranas and dozens of minor ones, written from about 400 to 1000 C.E. The Puranas are especially known as manifestations of *bhakti*, or devotion; they advocate an intense,

emotional, passionate faith in particular deities, which in turn promises salvation to all, regardless of caste.

- After the Puranas, there are even later, more sectarian texts that are held to be sacred by some Hindus but not by others. These include devotional poetry from the 6th to the 16th centuries written in vernacular languages, as well as a whole genre of Sanskrit texts known as Tantra (8th–11th centuries).
- Hinduism is more like a family of related religions than a single monolithic tradition, and it is less defined by a fixed scriptural canon than Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Hindus generally accept the authority of the Vedas (even if they encounter them only rarely), and they feel connected to the great epics, but there is a great deal of variation in their use of other sacred texts.

The Laws of Manu

- *The Laws of Manu*, dated to about 200 C.E., has had a tremendous impact on everyday life in India. This relatively short text outlines rules, customs, and expectations for the four major castes. It is attributed to Manu, the legendary progenitor of the human race, and it purports to record his words to a group of sages when they asked about the laws by which society could be harmoniously organized.
- The four major castes (*varnas*) in India are the Brahmins (priests/teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors/rulers), Vaishyas (farmers/merchants), and Shudras (laborers/servants).
 - All four castes were thought to have been descended from the Indo-European Aryans who migrated into India about 1500 B.C.E. and brought with them the Vedas and the Vedic religion. Only the upper three castes, however, could participate fully in Vedic rituals or receive an initiation known as being “twice-born.” Outside the system were outcastes, now referred to as Dalits, who were descendants of indigenous peoples.
 - For twice-born males, life was divided into four stages: student, householder, forest dweller, and wandering ascetic. A

man became a forest dweller when he retired from a career, divesting himself of possessions and moving to a hut in the forest, perhaps with his wife. As a wandering ascetic, he became homeless and left everything behind, even his wife, so that he could devote himself to meditation, asceticism, and spiritual pursuits.

- *The Laws of Manu* is composed of 2,684 verses divided into 12 chapter-length books. It starts with the creation of the world, including an account of the origins of the four *varnas*. Then, chapters 2–6 outline the rules for the different life stages of a Brahman male.
 - *The Laws* specifies appropriate teacher/student relations and, for householders, provides guidelines for marriage, sacrifices, hospitality, offerings to ancestors, and so on.
 - Generally, people were expected to stay within their own castes for marriages, meals, and other social interactions. There are also warnings about polluting influences that would compromise one's purity, including coming into contact with forbidden foods, death, members of lower castes, and menstruating women. Chapter 6 provides regulations for forest dwellers and wandering ascetics.
- Chapters 7 to 9 turn their attention to the dharma of Kshatriyas, with rules for kingship, diplomacy, and war and guidelines for the legal system.
- *The Laws* concludes with a chapter on problematic situations, such as children born of mixed-caste parents, a chapter on penance for sins, and a chapter on the workings of karma that explains why people are reborn into different castes.

Implications of *The Laws*

- In India, *The Laws of Manu* has historical value and may provide insights into some of the traditional values that are still part of Indian society. Caste regulations have weakened over time, but they

still play an important role in politics and marriage arrangements. As in Judaism, some of the expectations for priests have spread throughout society, so that education is a higher priority for many Indian women and lower castes, not just for Brahman males.

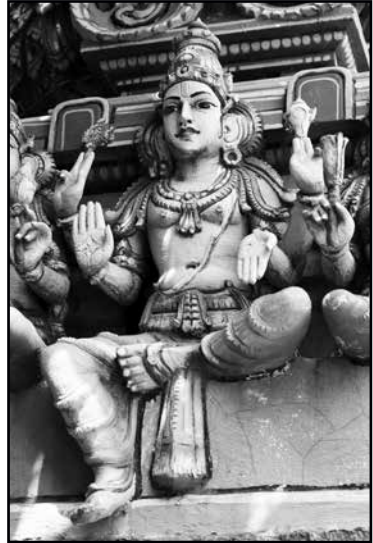
- But reading *The Laws of Manu* also gives us a chance to reconsider some of our own cultural assumptions. For example, the idea that “all men are created equal” is, in reality, a fiction. It’s a fact that some people are smarter than others, or better looking, or were born into more prosperous families—and remember, Hinduism’s law of karma provides an explanation for those differences that satisfies our sense of justice. Doesn’t it make sense to have different expectations for those of varying abilities? Perhaps there isn’t a single standard of achievement by which we can measure everyone.
- As much as we may recoil at the notion of social class fixed by caste, we in the West tend to determine social class by wealth, whereas in India, people could still belong to the Brahman caste even if they were poor. And though we like to think that anyone can succeed through hard work and ability, in actuality, there seems to be less social mobility in the United States than in many other modernized countries.
- It is also striking that for most of its history, India’s social stability came from the kind of dharma advocated by *The Laws of Manu* rather than from strict law codes. People had a defined place in society and acted accordingly because of pressure from family, neighbors, and especially, *jati* (local, self-governing subcastes). What does it say about our society that we depend on laws, contracts, and a somewhat intrusive government to keep things running smoothly?
- Although we might enjoy living in a secular society characterized by relative equality and informality, do we lose something when we jettison notions of sacred and profane? Should certain people, places, or activities be regarded as particularly holy or sacred? Are

there aspects of your life that are specifically oriented toward the divine or the spiritual?

- Finally, some bits of wisdom from *The Laws* might be worth adopting in our modern lives. For example, the idea that different modes of spirituality might be appropriate at different stages of life seems valuable.

Bhagavad Gita

- The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Lord”) is a scripture of just 700 verses. As an excerpt from the *Mahabharata*, it qualifies as Smriti, but its philosophical content and dialogue form make it sound like an Upanishad, and it is often treated as if it were Shruti. Further, it speaks to Hindus of all castes, combining discussions of spiritual insight with advice for worldly success and intense devotionalism.
- As we saw in the last lecture, on the eve of the great war between the Pandava brothers and their evil cousins, Arjuna rides in his chariot between the two opposing armies and sees family and friends on both sides. Realizing the enormity of the slaughter to come, he drops his bow and tells his chariot driver, Krishna, that he does not want to fight; kingship and victory are not worth the terrible cost.
- Arjuna is caught in an impossible situation. As a Kshatriya, his caste duty or dharma is to protect the world and punish wrongdoers.



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In suggesting that the way of devotion is open to everyone, Krishna tells Arjuna: “No one who is devoted to me is ever lost.”

Yet if he kills relatives in the process, he is sure to bring bad karma to everyone.

- Krishna offers multiple reasons why Arjuna should fight. These justifications can be organized into three broad categories: *jnana-yoga*, “the way of wisdom”; *karma-yoga*, “the way of action”; and *bhakti-yoga*, “the way of devotion.”
 - The first, the way of wisdom, draws on the insights of the Upanishads, in particular, the ideas of reincarnation and the oneness of all life. The meditations here are probably most appropriate for educated Brahmins.
 - The way of action, in contrast, is perhaps best suited for Kshatriyas. Krishna tells Arjuna that he must perform his caste duty, no matter how unpleasant, because to do otherwise would bring shame upon him and disorder to the world. For a warrior, action is preferable to the inaction or renunciation of a Brahmin, but the secret is to act dispassionately. In this way, one can live calmly and peacefully, free from the distractions of fear or anger.
 - In the third path, the way of devotion, bad karma can be avoided if one surrenders one’s deeds to Krishna. A little further on, Krishna suggests that the way of devotion is open to everyone, not just noble priests or warriors.
- Over the course of the Gita, Krishna gradually reveals himself, until in chapter 11, Arjuna asks to see Krishna’s true form.
 - There follows a terrifying theophany as Arjuna beholds an infinite being who encompasses the entire universe, with innumerable arms, bellies, and faces. Krishna is both creator and destroyer, and Arjuna is shocked to see the chief warriors in both armies hastening into his open mouths.
 - Arjuna begs Krishna to return to human form, but clearly any debate is over, just as when God’s voice speaks from the whirlwind in the Hebrew Bible’s book of Job.

- The Bhagavad Gita offers an attractive counter to the notion in the Upanishads that salvation comes only to those who leave behind all worldly responsibilities. Instead, the Gita demonstrates how spiritual attainment can be won while still honoring the social obligations of family, caste, and community. For this reason, the Gita has long been chanted in homes and temples, recited at festivals, and quoted by ordinary Hindus throughout India.

Suggested Reading

Dimmitt and Van Buitenen, eds. and trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology*.

Flood, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*.

Flood and Martin, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*.

Goodall, ed. and trans., *Hindu Scriptures*.

Miller, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*.

Mittal and Thursby, eds., *The Hindu World*.

O'Flaherty, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*.

Olivelle, trans., *The Law Code of Manu*.

Patton, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*.

Questions to Consider

1. How has the idea of dharma affected Indian life in the past and in the present?
2. Why is the Bhagavad Gita nearly universally beloved in India, even though it consists of just a few chapters from the *Mahabharata*?

Related Traditions—Sikh Scriptures

Lecture 6

From the ancient, massive, continuously expanding canon of Hinduism, we now jump to a related tradition that is nearly its opposite, at least with regard to scripture. Sikhism is one of the youngest global religions. It began in the 15th century in the Punjab region of India, now divided between India and Pakistan, and today, it claims nearly 30 million believers scattered around the world. Yet wherever they go, Sikhs show reverence for a particular sacred text whose form is exactly fixed: the Adi Granth (“First Scripture”). In this lecture, we’ll explore the development and content of this text and the Sikhs’ unique relationship to it.

Overview of Sikhism

- Sikhism is a religious tradition that comes out of Hinduism, though it has elements in common with Islam, as well.
 - Like Hindus, Sikhs believe in reincarnation and karma, and they see salvation as an escape from the cycle of rebirth and redeath, a liberation whereby they merge with God.
 - Yet like Muslims, they are monotheistic; their temples have no images or idols; and they reject the caste system, believing that all people are equal. In fact, one of the primary acts of charity associated with Sikh temples is free communal meals, where everyone, regardless of caste, social status, or even religion, eats together.
- Sikhs stress the importance of good works rather than rituals; they value ordinary life over asceticism or renunciation; and they strive to keep God in mind at all times, living lives of honest labor and generosity toward those in need.
- They also have one of the most distinctive relationships with scripture of any major world religion. Many faiths show great

respect for their sacred texts, but Sikhs take this to an extraordinary level, treating the *Adi Granth* as if it were a living person.

The 10 Gurus

- Sikhism began with revelations to Nanak, the first Guru (1469–1539). At about the age of 30, Nanak had a vision in which he was taken up to God’s heavenly court and commanded to rejoice in God’s name and to teach others to do the same. Over the next quarter century, he went on four long journeys to spread his message of reverence for God’s name.
 - According to Nanak, there is one God, eternal and unchanging, beyond form and gender. We are separated from God by ignorance and sin, but he is manifest throughout the cosmos, in our individual souls, and in the divine word that comes through the Gurus.
 - This concept of the “word” is closely associated with God’s name, which is not a specific title—he can be called many things—but, rather, an expression of divine reality, and God himself is considered the true Guru.
 - God’s grace can bring humans into mystical union with himself and free them from reincarnation, particularly if they meditate on his name and live wholesome, productive lives.
- Nanak spread his message through singing hymns that he had written himself, and eventually, some 974 of his poems became part of the *Adi Granth*. Unlike the *Mahabharata* or the Bible, the most sacred text of Sikhism does not include narrative; it is focused on timeless, eternal truths rather than the mundane facts of history, and these spiritual insights are often expressed in beautiful, poignant images.
- Over the course of two centuries, Punjabi Sikhs gradually became more distinct from other Hindu religious movements. The second Guru standardized a new script of 35 letters called Gurmukhi (“from the mouth of the Guru”) to write down the sacred hymns of

Nanak. The third Guru established new birth, marriage, and death ceremonies and emphasized the importance of the *langar* (free kitchens) of the Sikh temples.

- The fifth Guru, Arjan, is a key figure in the story of Sikh scripture. Not only did he build the Golden Temple in Amritsar, but he also selected nearly 6,000 hymns, written by his four predecessors and himself, for inclusion in the *Adi Granth*, which he formally established as the sacred text of the Sikhs in 1604. Somewhat surprisingly, the *Adi Granth* also included songs that had been composed by 15 Muslim Sufis and Hindu Sants, or holy men, that the fifth Guru felt were in tune with Sikh principles.
- Two years after editing the *Adi Granth*, Guru Arjan came into conflict with the Muslim Mughal emperor and was arrested and tortured to death, according to tradition, when Arjan refused to remove Hindu and Muslim references from the Sikh holy book. Tensions continued, and the seventh Guru disowned his own son when the young man offered to change a line from the *Adi Granth* to please another Mughal emperor.
- After the ninth Guru was executed when he refused to convert to Islam, his son, Gobind Singh, the final Guru, militarized the movement in 1699 by introducing the *Khalsa*, an order of soldier-saints, including both men and women, who would always protect and defend the faith.
- Gobind Singh added a few hymns to the *Adi Granth* that had been composed by his late father, the ninth Guru, and then in 1708, shortly before his death, he announced that there would be no more Gurus after himself. Instead, the perpetual Guru of the Sikhs would be their holy book, the *Adi Granth*, or as it was now to be known, the *Guru Granth Sahib* (“Revered Teacher Scripture”).

The Guru Granth Sahib

- The *Guru Granth Sahib* is composed of three sections of unequal length. It begins with an introductory collection of prayers, starting

with the Japji, which was written by Nanak and is recited every morning by devout Sikhs, followed by two evening prayers and a bedtime prayer.

- The second, quite long section consists of hymns or poems that are meant to be sung. They are organized by the melodic modes of classical Indian music called *ragas*, which are combinations of notes associated with different moods, times of the day, and seasons.
 - There are 31 *ragas* in the Adi Granth, and within each *raga* section, the hymns are subdivided into six categories based on length or meter. The poems within each subcategory are arranged by the order of the Gurus who wrote them.
 - Finally, at the end of each of the 31 *raga* sections are the songs of the 15 Hindu Sants and Muslim Sufis that Arjan thought worthy of inclusion in the sacred text of the Sikhs.
- The third part of the Guru Granth Sahib is made up of 77 pages of miscellaneous poems written by the Sikh Gurus, earlier Sants and Sufis, and 17 court poets.
- The language is mostly early-modern Punjabi, sometimes mixed with other northern Indian dialects, along with words from Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. It can be difficult for contemporary Sikhs to understand, yet the beauty and sacredness of the words as they are chanted or sung conveys profound religious emotion.
- As in many religious traditions, the opening verses of Sikh scripture are given particular attention, and they are thought to be the epitome of Sikh beliefs. The Guru Granth Sahib begins with the first composition of Nanak, the Mul Mantar (“root mantra”).
 - The beginning of the first verse is *Ik Onkar*, “the one creator,” referring to God. It is written by combining the numeral 1 with the first letter of the word *onkar*, which is also the first letter of the Gurmukhi alphabet. The combination of the number 1 and the first Gurmukhi letter is often used as a symbol of Sikhism.

- The Japji, the first prayer that is recited every morning by Sikhs, goes on to praise the one God, who is beyond human understanding, language, and the sacred texts of the world.
- The hymns of the Adi Granth proclaim the oneness of God and the equality of all human beings, and they offer some general guidelines for living. Mostly, however, the Adi Granth has thousands of devotional hymns praising God, many of which offer lovely phrases and striking images.

Reverence for the Guru Granth Sahib

- The Guru Granth Sahib is at the center of all Sikh ceremonies, and Sikhs treat their sacred text as a living Guru. In a Sikh house of worship, or *gurdwara* (“doorway to the Guru”), a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib takes the central place. It is brought out every morning and placed on a throne. When people come into a *gurdwara*, they cover their heads, remove their shoes, and bow to the Guru Granth Sahib. They sit on the floor, listening as the Adi Granth is read, sung, or interpreted.
- The Guru Granth Sahib speaks to worshippers directly through a practice called *vak* (“reading”). In the morning, the book is opened at random and the passage at the top of the left-hand page is read, which is considered a *hukam* (“order”) for the day. This may happen in a home for an individual or a family or in a *gurdwara* for an entire congregation.
- It is the Guru Granth Sahib that makes the *gurdwara*; wherever the text is, that place is holy. Some homes have a special room for the text, or it can be taken outside the home, but it is always treated with the utmost respect. Whenever the Adi Granth is transported, it is wrapped up and carried on top of someone’s head, and it is often accompanied by a procession.
- Like a beloved friend or teacher, the Guru Granth Sahib is present at all the important milestones of a Sikh’s life: when a child is born, when Sikhs are initiated into the Khalsa, and at marriage ceremonies.



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The daily order from the Guru Granth Sahib in the Golden Temple in Amritsar is made known electronically to Sikhs all over the world.

- At times of celebration and sorrow, it is customary for friends and family to read the entire Adi Granth aloud nonstop, day and night, in shifts. Any Sikh who can pronounce the Gurmukhi script, male or female, old or young, is allowed to participate as a reader, and it usually takes about 48 hours to get through the text.
- Celebrations at the *gurdwara* are often marked by nonstop singing of the entire Adi Granth.
- Sikh families and individuals often read the Adi Granth at a slower pace, though the sacredness of the book means that not all families have a copy. To show proper reverence, the Guru Granth Sahib must be taken out from a special resting place every morning and returned every evening. Because not everyone has an extra room, most Sikhs make do with smaller volumes of daily prayers and hymns from the Adi Granth, which don't require the same level of care.

- In fact, a complete copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, even in translation, is a bit difficult to come by. Probably the easiest way to gain access to the entire Adi Granth is through translations that have been posted online, such as the Khalsa Consensus Translation.

Suggested Reading

Dass, Nirmal, trans., *Songs of Kabir from the Adi Granth*.

———, trans., *Songs of the Saints from the Adi Granth*.

Holm, ed., *Sacred Writings*.

Guru Granth Sahib, Khalsa Consensus Translation.

Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*.

McLeod, trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*.

Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*.

Shackle and Mandair, eds. and trans., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

Singh, Nikky-Gurinder Kaur, *Sikhism: An Introduction*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do Sikhs treat their holy book, the Adi Granth, with such extraordinary reverence?
2. What has made the Adi Granth the most successful new scripture of the last several centuries?

Judaism—People of the Book

Lecture 7

In the next few lectures, we'll explore the contents and origins of the Hebrew Bible and the role it has played in Judaism over the centuries. We'll see how the Hebrew Bible is connected to other texts that some Jews have regarded as sacred at different times and places, and we'll compare it to the scriptures of other religions. But we'll start in the middle, with the story of one particular copy of the Hebrew Bible: the Aleppo Codex. Many scholars consider this to be the oldest (c. 930 C.E.), most complete, and most accurate text of the Hebrew Bible, even though a large portion of it has been mysteriously missing since the 1940s.

Production of the Aleppo Codex

- The Aleppo Codex was produced in a workshop overseen by one of the great masters of Jewish scripture production, Aaron ben Asher. He was a Masorete, that is, part of a group of scribes and scholars active in the 7th to the 11th centuries and dedicated to preserving the text of the Hebrew Bible as accurately as possible.
- These scholars faced two challenges, the first of which was the inevitability of errors in hand copying and the replication of errors in subsequent copies. The Masoretes came up with various techniques of quality control designed to detect such errors, such as counting the exact number of verses, words, and letters in biblical manuscripts.
- The second challenge was trying to establish the correct pronunciation of the text, which was more difficult than we might assume because Hebrew is written with consonants only. There were centuries of tradition in reading the Hebrew Bible, of course, but the Masoretes tried to fix exact pronunciations by adding marks to indicate vowels, accents, and pauses.

Later History of the Codex

- About a century after it was first created, the Aleppo Codex was bought by the Karaite community at Jerusalem (c. 1050). The Karaites were Jews who rejected the oral Torah of the rabbis (the Talmud), instead focusing exclusively on what was written in the Hebrew Bible. Naturally, they were interested in using the most accurate text possible.
- In 1099, the codex was taken away from Jerusalem as plunder by Christians in the First Crusade and held for ransom. Karaites in Ashkelon borrowed money from Jews in Egypt to rescue the codex.
- Eventually, the book ended up in Cairo, in the care of rabbinical Jews, where it became known for its meticulous accuracy. Many scholars, including the great Maimonides, consulted it.
- In the last half of the 14th century, the great-great-great grandson of Maimonides took the codex to Aleppo, Syria, where it remained for 600 years, locked away in the central synagogue. In 1943, concerned Jews in Jerusalem sent a Hebrew University lecturer to Aleppo to gain permission to take the codex to a safer location or, if need be, even to steal it. Unfortunately, he did neither.
- In November 1947, the day after the UN voted to establish the state of Israel, there was rioting in Aleppo, and a mob broke into and burned the synagogue. Someone, however, managed to save part of the codex. It was smuggled out of Syria and taken to Israel



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The Aleppo Codex, now housed in the Shrine of the Book in the Israel Museum, has been at the center of an international mystery since the 1940s.

in 1958; today, most of the codex is in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum.

- The codex is missing a few pages here and there, and most disappointingly, nearly the entire Torah has been torn out. There is, however, the tantalizing possibility that the missing pages might someday turn up. One page came to light in 1982, and another fragment was identified in 1988.

Origins of the Torah

- The sacred text contained in the Aleppo Codex is not the Old Testament. As we will see in a later lecture, early Christians regarded the Jewish scriptures as sacred, and they adopted a Greek translation called the Septuagint as part of their own canon. But there are differences in the number and order of the books in the Septuagint compared to the Hebrew scriptures. Further, some of the “Hebrew” Bible is written in the later language of Aramaic.
- Probably the best name for this sacred text is the one used by Jews themselves: Tanakh, which is an acronym consisting of the first letters of the three major divisions: Torah (the first five books, ascribed to Moses), Nevi'im (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings). Together, these constitute a library of Hebrew texts in many different genres, written over a 1,000-year period.
- For a long time, these writings circulated separately, with some books being regarded as authoritative in some communities but not others. Eventually, a core group of documents was recognized by all Jews as sacred, though this worked out differently for each of the three biblical divisions of Tanakh.
- The oldest compositions of the ancient Hebrews were originally passed down orally. Starting around the 10th century B.C.E., perhaps at the court of King David, various oral traditions were combined and recorded. Over the next few centuries, during the time of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., the texts were further revised. By

the time of the Babylonian Conquest in 586 B.C.E., it appears that the Torah as we know it today had taken shape.

- When Judah was conquered and its leading citizens were taken captive to Babylon, it seemed as if the Jews would lose their identity as a distinct people. But the Babylonians were themselves conquered by the Persians in 539 B.C.E., and the new king, Cyrus the Great, agreed to let the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.
- The return did not go smoothly; there was conflict with the Jews who had remained in Judea, and it took two waves of immigration and more than 20 years to rebuild the Temple, which was dedicated in 515 B.C.E. (This is the beginning of the Second Temple period.) In 458 B.C.E, another group of Jews from Babylon returned to Judea under the leadership of Ezra the scribe, and they were joined in 445 by more Jewish immigrants led by Nehemiah.
- Ezra and Nehemiah were appalled at the corruption and laxity they found among their coreligionists in Judea. In an attempt to reform and unify the community, Ezra gathered the people together and read aloud “the book of the Law of Moses.” Modern scholars believe that this “book of the Law” was the Torah. Thereafter, the people began to try to live their lives in accordance with the Torah; thus, Ezra started the transformation of the Jews into “the people of the book.”

Origins of the Prophets and Writings

- If the Torah was canonized around 400 B.C.E., the process took a bit longer for the second section of the Tanakh, the Prophets.
 - In Jewish Bibles, there are two subdivisions of this section: the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets).
 - It appears that an early version of the history of the Hebrews was written shortly before the Exile and then revised by Jews in Babylon. There were also extensive revisions and additions

made to the books of the so-called writing prophets during the Exile, though these books probably circulated separately. Eventually, a standard collection came to be accepted as canonical around 200 B.C.E.

- But the third section of the Tanakh, the Writings, was still open-ended in the 1st century C.E. Today, the Writings include Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and the Five Scrolls that are associated with Jewish festivals. This list of works wasn't agreed on until the 2nd or 3rd century C.E., and even then, it wasn't decided by a specific leader or a council. Rather, over time, the rabbis gradually came into agreement.
- Earlier Jewish communities, however, had larger collections of sacred texts. By the late Second Temple period, that is, before the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., many Jews were living far from Judea, across the Roman Empire. Not all of these Roman Jews were fluent in Hebrew or even in Aramaic; thus, they needed translations of their sacred texts. One of the most prominent of these was a Greek rendition called the Septuagint ("the Seventy").
- A Greek rendition of the remainder of the Hebrew Bible eventually rounded out the Septuagint, but where the Greek Torah and the Prophets had the same books as the Tanakh, the rest of the Septuagint included additional books. The first Christians adopted the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, and that tradition has continued into Catholic Bibles today. Early Protestants, however, relegated biblical books that were in Greek but not Hebrew to a separate section called the Apocrypha, and after some time, they stopped publishing them as part of their Bibles.
- Why weren't the extra books in the Septuagint accepted by later Jews as scripture? When the rabbis were arguing over which texts belonged in the Writings section of the Tanakh, they had two basic criteria: The books had to be in Hebrew, and they had to be at least as old as Ezra. These criteria eliminated some books for which the

Hebrew originals had been lost (or had never existed) and some later books.

- But several Jewish groups in the late Second Temple period thought that even more books should be accepted as scripture. Among these groups was the dissident community of Qumran, producers of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- Other Jews at the time wrote and treasured additional texts, known as pseudepigrapha, none of which was included in the Tanakh.

A Text-Centered Religion

- In many ways, the Jews became “the people of the book” through a series of losses. The ancient Israelites were connected to their God through the land he had promised them, the prophets who spoke in his name, the temple where he received sacrifices, and the kingly line he had established (the Davidic dynasty).
 - During the Exile, the Judeans in Babylon lost all four of these connections.
 - When the Jews returned to their land, the Davidic kings and the prophets were gone; thus, they compensated by consolidating their national histories and the writings of the prophets, starting with the five books of the Torah that were ascribed to the greatest of the prophets, Moses.
- After the Great Revolt in 66–70, the holy city of Jerusalem was leveled by the Romans, The Second Temple was destroyed, and the dispersion of the Jews was accelerated. The Jews needed something to bind them as a people.
 - The rabbis took their lead from Ezra the scribe and created a community that would be centered on a specific text. This innovation would eventually affect most of the world’s population through the influence of Christianity and Islam.

- Once the focus of Jewish identity became the Tanakh, it became more important than ever to carefully define its contents and the exact form the text would take forever after.

Suggested Reading

Coogan, *The Old Testament*.

Friedman, *The Aleppo Codex*.

Halbertal, *People of the Book*.

Rogerson, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*.

Silver, *The Story of Scripture*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the three major divisions of Jewish scripture, and why is the Hebrew Bible often called the Tanakh?
2. How did Jews ensure the accurate transmission of their sacred texts?

Five Books of Torah

Lecture 8

The word *Torah* is often translated as “Law,” but “Instruction” or “Teaching” might be a better rendition. The word sometimes refers to the first five books of the Bible, but it can also mean the Tanakh as a whole or the Talmud. To be more specific, we can talk of the Chumash (derived from the Hebrew word for “five”) or the Pentateuch (Greek for “five books”). Whatever we call it, this section includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. After a brief overview of its contents, we’ll look at two responses to the Torah, one from those who accept it as the word of God and another from those who try to understand it by reading it critically.

Influences of the Torah

- Even those who are not religious have had their lives shaped to some extent by the Torah. For example, we owe the practice of taking a break from our labors every seven days—the weekend—to the Torah, not to mention innumerable other aspects of art, literature, music, law, politics, history, ethics, and science. The Torah is one of the foundations of Western civilization.
- Early Christian missionaries to China were shocked to discover that the Chinese did not have any ancient creation myths; they simply believed that the cosmos had always been running as it was in the present. How could intelligent people not crave the sorts of explanations found in Genesis? This reaction on the part of the missionaries was also a subtle influence of the Torah.
- On a related note, when historians try to explain why China did not develop Western-style science, despite a long lead over Europe in technological advances, one possible factor that arises is the absence in China of the idea of a supreme lawgiver or creator god who established the rules of the universe. Because the Chinese never

expected to find a coherent set of causes and effects underlying the natural world, they didn't look for one.

- In addition to its historical significance, the Torah also serves as a source of guidance and comfort for large numbers of people, despite the fact that the world is quite different today than it was 2,500 years ago. One reason this ancient text remains relevant is that its meaning and application have been continuously debated and reevaluated.

Contents of the Torah

- The book of Genesis opens with 11 chapters about the early history of the world and humanity. In chapter 12, however, the focus shifts to the story of one particular family, starting with Abraham and extending to his descendants, the Hebrews or Israelites (named after Abraham's grandson, Israel).
 - God chooses Abraham and promises him land, numerous offspring, fame, and a key role in human history. He makes a covenant with Abraham and, in return, requires circumcision of the male members of the clan as a sign of that covenant.
 - There are complications along the way—barrenness, political conflict, family squabbles, and a test of Abraham's faithfulness—but God makes good on his promises to Abraham, his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob (renamed Israel), and Israel's 12 sons.
- In Exodus, we read that the Israelites were reduced to slavery in Egypt and that God appointed Moses to rescue them. Leading the people through the desert to Mount Sinai, Moses received commandments from God—not only the Ten Commandments but also laws regarding personal injuries, property rights, festivals, and so on. At Sinai, God makes a new, conditional covenant with his people: He will bless and protect them as long as they keep his commandments and worship only him.

- Leviticus consists almost entirely of religious regulations for the Israelites: instructions concerning offerings and sacrifices, the ordination of priests, festivals, permissible foods, and how to deal with sin.
- Numbers gets its name from a census of the Israelites in its first chapters. God had intended to give them the Promised Land of Canaan (later called Judea or Palestine) shortly after the revelation at Sinai, but they rebelled when they learned they would have to fight to take possession of it.
 - God then condemned the Israelites to wander for 40 years in the wilderness, until every adult had died except Caleb and Joshua. Not even Moses makes it into the Promised Land.
 - Still, God keeps his people alive by providing the miraculous food manna, and he blesses them so that their clothes and sandals don't wear out (Deut. 29:5). There are stories of travels, apostasy, warfare, divine healing, and even a talking donkey.
- The last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy ("Second Law") consists of three speeches given by Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab shortly before his death and their long-awaited entry into the Promised Land. Moses reaffirms the covenant, reiterates its requirements, and pronounces blessings and curses upon the people, depending on their faithfulness.
- The God of the ancient Israelites seems similar in many ways to the gods of other nations at the time, yet there were important differences, as well, highlighted in the term *ethical monotheism*. The Hebrew God insisted that his people worship him alone, and he cared not just about rituals and sacrifices but also about how the Israelites treated one another.

Religious Perspectives

- For more than 2,000 years, Jews assumed that the Torah was revealed by God to Moses, who then wrote it all down. As we saw in the last lecture, the Masoretes developed one standard form of

the text between 600 and 1000 C.E. The Torah was divided into 54 weekly sections to be read over the course of a year in Sabbath services. In the 2nd century B.C.E., Antiochus Epiphanes, an anti-Semitic ruler, banned the public reading of the Torah, and Jews substituted 54 selections from the Prophets. Today, both are chanted every week in synagogue.

- The most prized possession in any synagogue is the Torah scroll. Even today, these scrolls must be handwritten to exacting specifications. When the members of the congregation hear the words of the Torah, it is as if they, too, were at Sinai or on the plains of Moab, receiving and renewing the covenant given to their ancestors.
- The Torah was not only encountered in ritual and worship, but it was also studied intensely. The main messages of covenant and ethical monotheism came through clearly, but the rabbis also noticed gaps, redundancies, and contradictions, which they sought to explain and harmonize in quite sophisticated ways.
 - The Torah depicts God as righteous and compassionate, yet he can also be difficult to understand. His commandment to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac is a famous and troubling example. Further, God's commandments sometimes make perfect sense, while at other times, the regulations seem arbitrary.
 - In their Torah study, the rabbis were particularly concerned with the application of its precepts. The point was to live in accordance with the laws of Moses to sustain the covenant.
- Christians, who adopted the Torah as part of their own sacred text, saw the law of Moses as superseded in Christ; thus, they mostly ignore the regulations of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, or they apply them selectively, focusing on the Ten Commandments. Christians often criticize the hundreds of detailed rules as overly legalistic or ritualized, yet from a Jewish perspective, the effort required to live in accordance with Torah is a way to make one's whole life sacred.

- Debates about how best to adapt an ancient text to the modern world still continue among both Jews and Christians. The stories told in the Torah are still inspiring to many, but perhaps we need to read those narratives in different ways in light of contemporary notions of gender roles, racial equality, democracy, science, and religious pluralism.

Scholarly Perspectives

- At about the time of the Enlightenment, scholars of ancient languages and documents began to apply the methods they used in studying these other ancient texts to the Bible. From this perspective, the redundancies and repetitions found in the Bible could be seen as clues to the origins of the text.
 - These scholars noticed, for instance, that some passages referred to God as Elohim, rendered into English as “God,” while others used the name Yahweh, written with the consonants YHWH and usually translated as “Lord.” Some passages differed in other ways related to characteristic vocabulary and themes.
 - It occurred to scholars that the Torah might not have been written all at once by Moses but might be a composite of different sources assembled over time. This view may challenge traditional assumptions, but it is not necessarily dismissive of the Torah as scripture. In fact, many anomalies in the Bible start to make sense when we recognize that the text came into being through a long and complicated process.
- In addition, as scholars deciphered long-lost languages and archaeologists unearthed ancient artifacts, it became easier to understand the Torah in its original historical context. Its narratives could be compared to other creation stories, flood narratives, and national epics.
- By the late 20th century, scholars had arrived at a conception of the Torah as a combination of four basic sources.

- The first is J, which stands for the Yahwist. This scribe, working in the 10th century B.C.E., uses the term Yahweh, called the sacred mountain Sinai, and portrays God in a somewhat anthropomorphic fashion as a deity who communicates directly with humans.
- The second source is E, the Elohist, who uses the term Elohim for God, refers to the sacred mountain as Horeb, and most often shows God working through dreams and angels. This source is dated to the 8th century B.C.E.
- At some point, the J and E sources were combined and augmented by D, the Deuteronomist. This source, dated from the late 7th century, is mostly concerned with the book of Deuteronomy, with its emphasis on centralizing worship and sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple.
- Finally, P, the priestly source, was a product of the Exile in the 6th century and is characterized by an interest in order, boundaries, priests, and the tabernacle. Parts of P are interspersed throughout the first five books of the Torah.
- In recent decades, this neat scheme has been disputed. Perhaps E was an oral tradition rather than a written document. Perhaps the four major sources were the products of different scribal



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A mezuzah is a piece of handwritten parchment with verses from Deuteronomy 6 and 11, rolled up and placed in a small case, and affixed to the doorpost of a Jewish home.

schools rather than individuals. The various strands of the Torah have proven difficult to disentangle and to date, but nearly all scholars now accept that the text had a long and complicated editorial history.

- The insights of the historical-critical method have been challenging for some believers because they complicate the traditional story, but scholarship has helped us to understand the text more clearly than ever before. And reading the Torah as carefully as possible, with all the scholarly tools available, can be seen as an act of devotion.

Suggested Reading

Alter, trans., *The Five Books of Moses*.

Berlin and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*.

Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*.

Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

Jewish Publication Society, *JPS Torah Commentary*.

Robinson, *Essential Judaism*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the main genres contained in the Torah?
2. Why did this collection of books become the most sacred part of Jewish scripture, and what are its origins, according to scholars?

Prophets and Writings

Lecture 9

There is a tremendous variety of material in the Prophets and the Writings, from histories of ancient Israel to the words of the prophets, from wisdom literature to charming narratives, from philosophical disputations to ancient hymns. Regardless of your religious background, you already know some of these texts because they constitute one of the foundations of Western culture; still, you may be surprised at how gritty or earthy some of these writings are. At the center of all of them is the God of Israel, a terrifying and unpredictable being, yet one who is nevertheless devoted to his people Israel and to all of humankind.

Overview of the Prophets and Writings

- As mentioned earlier, the Hebrew Bible is similar but not identical to the Christian Old Testament. Christians have a few extra books (at least in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions) because their versions were originally derived from the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Masoretic text. In the 4th century, there was a turn toward Hebrew by Catholics following the example of Jerome, but Orthodox Christians have continued to use the Septuagint.
- Another noticeable difference is in the arrangement of the books. The Torah ends with Moses on the plains of Moab, giving his last words to the Israelites before they move into the Promised Land.
 - In Christian Bibles, the Torah is followed by a series of historical books, then poetical and wisdom books, and ending with the Prophets.
 - In the Tanakh, the order is somewhat different. Joshua is regarded as the first book of the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings). Next come the Latter Prophets and then the Writings.

- The Christian ordering puts emphasis on genres, but the Jewish arrangement makes more sense in terms of the canonization of these particular documents. As we have seen, the Writings were the last books to be accepted as canonical, and some of them were among the last to be written.

The Prophets

- The Prophets section begins with Joshua and what appears to be a strikingly successful conquest of the Promised Land by the Israelites. In Judges, however, we discover that the Israelites are not well organized, and a good deal of fighting takes place with other ethnic groups still left in the land and even between different tribes of Israel.
- The books of Samuel and Kings narrate the rise and fall of the monarchy, starting with Saul and moving to David and Solomon. The united kingdom lasts only three generations, and after the death of Solomon, the Israelites split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.
 - Israel has a tumultuous history, replete with coups and assassinations as different families vie for power. In 722 B.C.E., the Israelites are conquered by the Assyrians.
 - Judah, on the other hand, is ruled by a single dynasty, the house of David. But in 586 B.C.E., it, too, succumbs to foreign invasion, when the Babylonians take over and exile many of the most prominent and wealthy Jews to Babylon. At this point, the Jews have lost their land, their nation, their monarchy, and their temple, all because, according to the biblical historians, they have been unfaithful to the covenant.
- The Prophets section of the Tanakh continues with the writings of the Latter Prophets, all of whom spell out in detail what was expected of the Israelites by God and where they fell short.
 - It begins with the 8th-century-B.C.E. prophet Isaiah (probably more than one author, writing over about two centuries), then moves to Jeremiah (writing at the time of the fall of Judah),

and Ezekiel (writing from Babylon during the Exile). The 12 Minor Prophets come in roughly chronological order, from Hosea in the 8th century to Malachi in the 5th.

- Frequently writing in poetic form, the prophets combine condemnations of wickedness and idolatry with promises of hope and national restoration—that God will not forget his wayward people, even in exile.
- In the Prophets, we see the work of a number of writers and later editors trying to make sense of the political and social catastrophe of Jewish history.
 - Since the 1940s, scholars have referred to the sequence of books from Joshua to Kings as the Deuteronomistic History because they narrate the story of the Israelites using the language and theology of the book of Deuteronomy. Israel's disregard of God's commands brought on the curses pronounced by Moses at Moab. God is faithful to his promises, even if Israel was not.
 - The writings of the Prophets reinforce this message, but they also hold out hope that God will still have mercy on his people—that someday he will gather them together again and usher in the messianic age of peace, good will, and prosperity.
- It is striking that the Jews believed God's personality and will could be ascertained through the study of history, and this perspective continued with Christians and Muslims. By contrast, there was never quite the same emphasis in India on the accurate recording of the reigns of specific kings, and as a result, the history of early India is much more difficult to recover.

The Writings

- If the Prophets section tends to be focused on the political and religious history of Israel, the Writings are more diverse and broad-reaching. The Writings include the stories of Job and Ruth, who were foreigners rather than Hebrews, and Proverbs, which offers universal wisdom that crosses religious and ethnic boundaries.

- The Writings also include books that seem to break all rules. The Song of Songs is erotic love poetry; the author of Ecclesiastes wonders if life is pointless; and after the famous tale of the lion's den, the book of Daniel veers into strange apocalyptic prophecies. The Psalms praise God and his creation, yet they also express frustration and bewilderment at his inaction. And Job offers one of the most powerful theological explorations in world literature, asking why God allows the righteous to suffer while the evil prosper.
- The Hebrew Bible is a sacred text in conversation with itself, and it's a striking reminder that religious faith is not necessarily opposed to doubt and questioning. Indeed, another take on the challenge of how different religions and cultures can get along is the Hebrew Bible's implicit suggestion that one should be wary of people who claim to have all the answers. The Tanakh may be a closed canon, but the reticence of biblical narratives and the abundance of prophetic perspectives can lead to deeper analysis and more fervent seeking.
- The Writings conclude with some historical books—Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles—that narrate the story of Israel down to about 400 B.C.E. The Tanakh ends on a note of hope: In the last verses of Chronicles, the Persian king Cyrus fulfills a prophecy of Jeremiah by charging the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

Themes in the Prophets and Writings

- Obviously, there is a great deal of material here, written over many centuries and incorporating different genres and perspectives, but we can identify at least four themes. The first of these is ethical monotheism, a radical idea in the ancient world but one that becomes emphatic in the Prophets.
 - References in the Torah might be seen as henotheism, that is, the worship of a single god while accepting the existence of other deities. Thus, Israel should worship only Yahweh, even if other nations have their own gods.

- Isaiah, however, stresses that there is only one God in the universe and that any others are fakes or figments of human imagination. This one universal God cares not just about receiving offerings of meat and grain but about how we treat one another, particularly the most vulnerable among us. There are elements of social justice in most major religions, but the declarations along these lines of the prophets are particularly powerful.
- A second theme concerns the mission and destiny of Israel. At first, Yahweh seems similar to a tribal God, concerned mostly with his own people, and the Former Prophets constitutes a national history. But the Prophets once again expands that vision and argues that even though God has his chosen people, that people has been chosen as a means to bless the entire world. Isaiah, for example, quotes God as saying, “I will also make you a light of nations, That My salvation may reach the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6, Jewish Publication Society Tanakh).
- A third theme is God’s faithfulness and loving kindness. In numerous places in the Hebrew Bible, God seems like a vengeful destroyer of the wicked, yet it is also clear that he is a compassionate, merciful deity, a loving father figure who enters into covenantal relations with his children and has their best interests at heart, even when they do not reciprocate his devotion. The prophet Hosea



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Ruth makes a brave promise to stand by her mother-in-law, Naomi, but the two women have no food and no means of support.

captures this idea in a beautiful verse in which God speaks of Israel as a parent might speak of a toddler.

- A final theme in the last two sections of the Tanakh is a deep sense of humanity, seen in the stories of Job and Ruth.
 - Job is a lengthy philosophical examination, in poetry, of one of the most difficult questions in religion: If God is loving and powerful, why do bad things happen to good people? In the end, God speaks out of whirlwind, but he doesn't explain why he has taken everything from Job. For his part, Job ultimately acknowledges his limited perspective compared with God's majesty and power. Even if clear-cut answers are not forthcoming, it still makes sense to trust God.
 - On the other end of the spectrum is the story of Ruth, a tale of kindness and grace that is short and simple yet profoundly moving. The story of Ruth's self-sacrifice for her mother-in-law, Naomi, is one in which terrible misfortunes are overcome and barriers of nationality, ethnicity, class, and generations are transcended—all through kindness.

Suggested Reading

Alter and Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*.

Brettler, *How to Read the Bible*.

Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*.

Harris and Platzner, *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*.

Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*.

Rosenberg, ed., *Congregation*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the most important stories and themes in the last two sections of the Hebrew Bible?
2. Why did it take longer for these writings to be accepted as scripture?

Apocrypha and Dead Sea Scrolls

Lecture 10

One of the more colorful figures in 1st-century Judaism was a historian named Josephus, who wrote several books in Greek to explain and defend Judaism to a Gentile audience. In one of them, he described the Jewish scriptures as containing 22 books and said that no one would venture “to alter a syllable.” Of course, we know that the Tanakh today has 24 books, that many versions of Jewish scriptures were circulating in the 1st century, and that the gradual process of canonization was still underway in the time of Josephus. In this lecture, we’ll discuss two collections of sacred texts that didn’t make it into the Hebrew Bible: the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

- The Apocrypha are the books in the Greek Septuagint that weren’t included in the later Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. They were considered scripture by Greek-speaking Jews in the Roman Empire and by Christians at least until the time of Martin Luther. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians still include the Apocrypha in their Bibles, but Protestants and Jews today regard these texts as extracanonical.
- The major works in the Apocrypha are Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and expanded versions of Esther and Daniel. All date from the Hellenistic period, that is, the 4th through 1st centuries B.C.E.
 - The book of Tobit is about a God-fearing Jew living in Nineveh, who becomes blind and prays to die. At the same time, a young woman named Sarah also prays to die because each of her seven husbands has been killed by an evil demon on their wedding night. But God sends an angel in disguise to accompany Tobit’s son Tobias on a journey, during which he catches a magic fish whose entrails can be used to both drive

away demons and cure blindness. Tobias marries Sarah and returns home to heal his father.

- The Book of Judith is supposedly set during the time that Nebuchadnezzar was king of Assyria, although Nebuchadnezzar was, in fact, a Babylonian ruler. It tells the story of the pious and beautiful widow Judith, who, when her town was besieged by the Assyrians, devised a plan to win the trust of the Assyrian commander and cut off his head. When the Assyrian soldiers saw their leader's headless body, they fled in panic.
- The Wisdom of Solomon consists of moral exhortations, praise of wisdom (personified as a woman), and a retelling of the Exodus story. Sirach offers proverbs and advice for living happily and ethically. Baruch is a reflection on the meaning of the Babylonian Conquest, supposedly written in the early 6th century, although it's actually a later work.
- The books of Esther and Daniel are expanded with additional stories that, in the case of Esther, make the tale more explicitly religious, and for Daniel, add some colorful details about his life, including the story of his rescue of Susanna, a woman falsely accused of adultery.
- The book of 1 Maccabees is a historical account of the years 175 to 135 B.C.E., when Jews under the leadership of the Maccabee brothers revolted against their Seleucid overlord, Antiochus IV. The Jews defeated their oppressors and rededicated the Temple in an eight-day celebration, which was memorialized as Hanukkah. The Jews succeeded in establishing an independent kingdom, which lasted for a century, until they were conquered by the Romans in 63 B.C.E.
- The book of 2 Maccabees is a more explicitly religious retelling of the early events of 1 Maccabees. It is also the only book in

the Old Testament, aside from Daniel, that speaks directly of a resurrection, a controversial doctrine among 1st-century Jews.

- The pseudepigrapha (“false writings”) were texts written in the late centuries B.C.E. or early centuries C.E. and attributed to major figures from the Bible, such as Enoch or Moses. There are dozens of such works. Although some Jews at the time seem to have accepted them as sacred texts, they fell out of favor and, like the Apocrypha, were preserved by Christians.
 - One example is 1 Enoch, which tells of visions that Enoch had about the end of times, along with a great deal of lore about angels and astronomy.
 - Another prominent book of the pseudepigrapha is Jubilees, an extensive rewriting of Genesis and Exodus that emphasizes calendar issues, the rules of ritual purity, and the importance of the Torah.
- Scholars learned more about the Apocrypha when the *genizah* (“book repository”) at the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo was discovered in 1896. Some pages of text found in the synagogue made their way to Solomon Schechter, a professor of Jewish studies at Cambridge. Recognizing their value, he arranged for an expedition and discovered that the *genizah* contained more than 200,000 manuscript fragments, dating from the 9th to the 19th centuries.
 - The *genizah* yielded a treasure trove of biblical and rabbinical manuscripts, as well as new sources about medieval Jewish life.
 - Schechter was particularly interested in a few lines in Hebrew of the apocryphal book of Sirach, a book scholars thought had survived only in Greek. Schechter also noticed several large fragments of a previously unknown text that he hypothesized had been written by an early Jewish dissident group. He was later proven right about this text, which he called the Zadokite Document.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

- The traditional story of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that they were found by a Bedouin boy near the ruins of Qumran in 1947. Eventually, fragments of nearly 900 manuscripts were discovered in 11 caves at Qumran, dating from the 3rd century B.C.E. to the 1st century C.E., when the documents were apparently hidden to preserve them from the Romans during the Great Revolt. There is still debate about who exactly wrote these documents, but the best guess is a community of Essenes living at Qumran.
- According to Josephus, the Essenes were Jews who were critical of the authorities at Jerusalem and had gone into the desert to live in devotion, asceticism, and celibacy until the end of the world, which they expected to come soon. Josephus reported that they lived in communal settings without money or personal property, ate common meals, performed daily ritual baths, refused to participate in temple sacrifices at Jerusalem, and observed strict Sabbath restrictions.



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Aside from a nearly complete scroll of Isaiah and half a dozen other large scrolls, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found mostly in pieces—some 25,000 fragments in all.

- The Zadokite Document described a similar sort of community that had been founded by a mysterious “preacher of righteousness” who urged his followers to avoid the “three nets of Belial”: fornication, riches, and profanation of the temple. Several longer copies of this same text were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and because it mentions the city of Damascus several times, it has been renamed the Damascus Document.
- Other distinctive texts from the Qumran community include the Community Rule, which sets forth procedures for those who wish to join and for a governing council; the Temple Scroll, which provides a blueprint for how the Temple should be rebuilt and how its rituals should be carried out; and the War Scroll, which summarizes the coming 40-year conflict between the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness.” The Copper Scroll purports to reveal the locations of some 60 places in the land where treasures were buried.
- About two-thirds of the nearly 900 scrolls that were hidden by the members of the Qumran community were writings that were specific to their particular type of Judaism or other similar movements, but 222 were copies of books from the Bible, with another 10 scrolls from the Apocrypha and several dozen from the pseudepigrapha.

Comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible

- Biblical scholars faced a monumental task in piecing together and deciphering the scrolls, but it was incredibly exciting to work with copies of biblical texts that were 1,000 years older than what they had previously had access to. Scholars had long compared the Hebrew Bible with the Greek Septuagint, guessing at what the underlying Hebrew might have been, but the Dead Sea Scrolls predated even the Septuagint by centuries.
- Further, because the scrolls were in Hebrew, scholars didn’t have to wonder about the accuracy of the translation, and they found that the Masoretes had generally been correct in preserving these sacred texts; most of the differences were minor.

- It soon became clear that the biblical books did not have a fixed form in the 1st century. Some copies seemed to be the ancestors of the Masoretic text, while others appeared to be more like the Hebrew originals of the Septuagint. For instance, the Greek version of Jeremiah is about 13 percent shorter than the Masoretic version. Of the six Hebrew copies recovered from the caves, we can determine from the surviving fragments that several are of the longer Masoretic type and one is clearly related to the shorter Septuagint version.
- Readings from the Dead Sea Scrolls are frequently incorporated in footnotes to modern translations of the Bible, such as the New International Version (NIV) or New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
 - For example, at Isaiah 53:11, the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (NJPS) has “Out of his anguish he shall see it,” while the NRSV reads: “Out of his anguish he shall see light.”
 - The difference is that the word *light* appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls version of Isaiah, but not in the Masoretic text. Such variants may seem inconsequential to some, but many believers feel that every word in a sacred text is important.
- In the century or two after the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, when the rabbis were still debating which books belonged in the Writings section of the Tanakh, they developed the notion of “texts that defile the hands.” This was their working definition of *canon*; a book belonged in the Hebrew Bible if coming into contact with it made people ritually impure, forcing them to wash their hands afterward.
 - This concept is counterintuitive. How could something sacred make someone unclean? The idea may be related to the famous story in 2 Samuel of an Israelite who reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant when it was being transported and looked like it might topple. Despite his good intentions, he was struck dead on the spot. Some objects can be so awesomely holy that they become dangerous to ordinary mortals.

- Today, when the Torah Scroll is read in a synagogue, the reader follows along in the text with a *yad*, or Torah pointer, so that he or she doesn't actually touch the scroll. Perhaps this tradition is for the reader's protection as much as for that of the Torah Scroll.

Suggested Reading

Attridge, ed., *Harper Collins Study Bible*.

Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.

Collins, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography*.

Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Hoffman and Cole, *Sacred Trash*.

The Israel Museum, *The Digital Dead Sea Scrolls* (<http://dss.collections/imj.org.il/>).

Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*.

Rogerson and Lieu, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*.

VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*.

Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why were the books of the Apocrypha excluded from the Hebrew Bible, even though some Jews anciently regarded them as scripture (and Catholics still do to this day)?
2. What is the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls for biblical scholarship?

Oral Torah—Mishnah and Talmud

Lecture 11

The process by which Jews became “the people of the book” began after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and reached its culmination a few centuries after the Romans leveled the Second Temple in 70 C.E. In the absence of kings, prophets, and priests, a new group arose to help Jews scattered around the world fashion a new identity and preserve their traditions. These were the rabbis, or teachers of Torah. Unlike the priesthood or kingship, the position of rabbi was not a hereditary one; it came through individual effort and study. In this lecture, we’ll explore the results of that study found in the Mishnah and the Talmud.

Philosophical Groups among the Jews

- The historian Josephus described three philosophical groups or parties among the Jews in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C.E.: the Essenes, who rejected the authority of the Temple priesthood and withdrew from society to practice purity and asceticism; the Sadducees, the wealthy, aristocratic priestly authorities associated with the Temple; and the Pharisees, who were devoted to the study and application of the Mosaic Law. Josephus tells us that the Pharisees were better liked than the Sadducees, who were seen as collaborators with the Romans.
- One of the main points of contention between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was the Torah.
 - The Pharisees claimed that when God had given Moses his five books at Mount Sinai, he had also revealed to Moses an oral Torah of explanations and interpretations, which was passed down to later generations.
 - This was, the Pharisees claimed, the origin of their distinctive beliefs and interpretations, such as their belief in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead.

- Only one author from the Second Temple period—the apostle Paul—explicitly states, “I was a Pharisee.” Nevertheless, from what we can piece together about their beliefs from later sources, the Pharisees were sometimes strict, but they could also be humanely lenient.
- After the Great Revolt of 66–70 C.E., when the Essenes were wiped out and the Temple (the power base of the Sadducees) was destroyed, the Pharisees, led by rabbis, became dominant. Their emphasis on studying Torah became even more pronounced after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 C.E.).
 - Some had seen Simon bar Kokhba as a messiah who would restore Jewish independence, but the rebellion was brutally suppressed, the dispersal of Jews from the Holy Land was accelerated, and the rabbis began to regard apocalypticism and political aspirations as dead ends.
 - Judaism became a text-centered religion, with a focus on adherence to the moral and ritual requirements of the law.



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The Pharisees claimed that the oral Torah God had given Moses at Mount Sinai had been passed down by word of mouth through generations until it reached them.

The Mishnah

- The rabbis looked to the Torah, both written and oral, as the key to the survival of Judaism, but there were concerns about the accuracy and transmission of the oral Torah. Thus, about 200 C.E., Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (“Judah the Patriarch”) wrote down the first part of the oral Torah, the Mishnah (“repetition” or “oral instruction”). It’s not exactly a law code but more a collection of legal judgments,

some attributed to specific rabbis; frequently, more than one opinion is recorded.

- The Mishnah is a fairly lengthy book, organized into six parts or orders: (1) Seeds—agriculture and prayers; (2) Appointed Seasons—Sabbath, festivals, and fast days; (3) Women—marriage, divorce, and vows; (4) Damages—business relations, law courts, and punishments; (5) Holy Things—dietary laws, the temple, and sacrifices; and (6) Purities—ritual purity and purification. Each of the six orders has between 7 and 12 subsections called tractates, for a total of 63.
- The judgments are terse and orderly, as if designed for memorization or teaching. The first paragraph, for example, concerns rules for reciting the daily evening prayer, the Shema. The passage also includes an argument between the followers of two great rabbis, Shammai and Hillel, about whether people had to lie down to say the evening prayer.
- The Mishnah is, obviously, an unusual law code. Multiple opinions are offered, often with none being pronounced correct. Rabbis quote scripture, cite precedents from defunct temple practices, offer varying perspectives, and tell stories. Rather than simply providing the correct answer, the Mishnah is a tool for teaching students how to think through difficult issues and arrive at reasonable opinions themselves.

The Talmud

- Of course, the conversations continued, with rabbis and students debating the meaning of the Mishnah, particularly in academies in Palestine and Babylonia. Out of those debates came the Talmud—also considered part of the oral Torah—which includes learned disputations, detailed legal analyses, folktales, stories of famous teachers, aphorisms, scriptural interpretation, and much more.
 - The oral traditions in Palestine were edited and written down about 400 C.E. in what is commonly referred to as the Jerusalem Talmud (“teaching” or “learning”).

- The discussions in Babylonia were similarly put into writing about 100 years later. The Babylonian Talmud, about three times longer than the Jerusalem version, has long been considered more eloquent, subtle, and complete. It is second only to the Tanakh in the library of the sacred texts of Judaism.
- The Talmud is a massive work that reproduces the Mishnah in Hebrew and adds a commentary in Aramaic called the Gemara. This commentary is an edited transcript of the debates of the rabbis and their students as they investigated, explained, and elaborated on the Mishnah and the principles they deduced from its rulings. Since early modern times, the Talmud has been printed with multiple commentaries surrounding the Mishnah and Gemara on each page.
- There are many great stories in the Talmud, but what we usually see on display is detailed legal reasoning, often backed up by quotations from the Tanakh.
 - In long, complicated arguments, with frequent digressions, the rabbis work their way through all aspects of Jewish life and lore with an astonishing level of psychological and philosophical nuance.
 - Different scriptural interpretations and legal rulings from several generations are set side by side and given equal weight. When there was a practical need, one could be chosen as more authoritative (usually by consensus), but dissenting opinions were preserved for possible reevaluation and use in future debates.
- It's impossible to overstate the importance of the Talmud in Judaism. Students can spend their entire lives exploring its contents, and indeed, Orthodox Jews probably spend more time with the Talmud than with the Tanakh. But the Talmud is not just another commentary; it's Torah, the oral counterpart to the written Torah given to Moses at Sinai. Many Jews believe that, even today, Talmud study should be done aloud with a partner, reading in turns and discussing its meaning line by line.

- Although rabbis were not prophets, the oral Torah provided access to continuing revelation. The will of God in new eras and situations could be ascertained through the discussions of the rabbis in the Talmud—and this was God’s preferred mode of communication. One of the most famous stories in the Talmud has God laughing when the rabbis point out that even he can’t intervene in the system of the two Torahs and the proper procedures for their interpretation.
- The idea of a sacred oral text might remind us of the Hindu Vedas, but there are important differences. The Vedas were used primarily in rituals, where they were valued more for their sacred sounds than their meaning, and they always remained the possession of priests. The Talmud, in contrast, didn’t have a role in public worship services, its meaning was endlessly investigated and debated, and Jews from all walks of life were encouraged to study it.
- Today, tens of thousands of Jews all over the world participate in the Daf Yomi program (“page of the day”), which was started in Poland in the 1920s. The idea is that one can read through the entire Talmud in 7.5 years, reading one page (two sides) every day. The specified page for the day is the same for everyone, and there are celebrations at the end of each cycle.

Judaism’s Sacred Texts

- The sacred texts of Judaism, in order of authority and holiness, are the Torah (Pentateuch), the Tanakh, and the Talmud (including the Mishnah), but the library of Judaism includes much more. There is an extensive supplement to the Mishnah called the Tosefta that predates the Talmud. There are rather free commentaries on the Tanakh called Midrash that were written by rabbinic sages before the year 1000. From the medieval period, there are voluminous commentaries to the Hebrew Bible, as well as works of Jewish philosophy and attempts to codify the rulings of the Talmud.
- But in the midst of all this learning and study, there were also Jews who were looking for more direct ways to connect with God through mystical practices. Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, is a

huge, fascinating topic. Its masterpiece is the *Zohar* (“*Book of Splendor*”), a text that many Jews have considered sacred. Indeed, from about 1500 to 1800, the *Zohar* was regarded by some as a source of doctrine and revelation almost equal in authority to the Torah and the Talmud.

- The *Zohar* first appeared in 13th-century Spain, published by Rabbi Moses De León, who claimed that he had found an ancient Aramaic text dating back to the 2nd-century Palestinian master Simeon ben Yohai and his disciples. The *Zohar* is composed of several separate treatises, including spiritual commentary and mystical stories. Modern scholars have determined that it was probably written by Moses De León, but that hasn’t dampened the enthusiasm of many for this remarkable text.
- When Jews use the term *Torah*, they sometimes have in mind the Five Books of Moses, which they regard as the most authoritative part of the Tanakh. But just as often, *Torah* refers to both the written and oral traditions that were thought to have been received by Moses, particularly as the latter were embodied in the discussions in the Talmud.
- There are several forms of Judaism in the world today—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionism—that differ in their degree of observance of traditional rules and their engagement with the modern world, but they all come out of rabbinical Judaism and its concern for the oral Law.
 - It is interesting to imagine how different Judaism would be today if it had not closed its canon with the Tanakh and, instead, had continued to produce new scriptures of equal or greater authority.
 - Certainly, the tradition of textual analysis, interpretation, and commentary was decisive in creating a community of close readers and tireless debaters, who expressed their devotion to God through study.

Suggested Reading

Alexander, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism*.

Bokser, ed. and trans., *The Talmud: Selected Writings*.

Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*.

Giller, *Reading the Zohar*.

Holtz, *Back to the Sources*.

Jacob, *The Talmudic Argument*.

Matt, trans., *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*.

Neusner, *Making God's Word Work*.

———, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation*.

Scholem, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Splendor*.

Solomon, ed. and trans., *The Talmud: A Selection*.

Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did rabbinical Judaism become the dominant form of the religion after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple?
2. How does the Talmud combine creativity and tradition?
3. What is the *Zohar*?

Related Traditions—Zoroastrian Scriptures

Lecture 12

In this course, we discuss scriptures of the world's major religious traditions in roughly the order that their earliest sacred texts appeared; thus, we first covered Hinduism, then Judaism, Buddhism, and so on. At the end of our discussion of each of the major religions, we will also devote a lecture to the scriptures of a smaller, related tradition. Most of the time, these are later faiths, such as Sikhism, Mormonism, and Baha'i, but following our lectures on Judaism, we will take a brief look at Zoroastrianism, which has scriptures that are nearly as old as the Vedas. Although there are relatively few Zoroastrians today, the religion has a long and rich history, with important connections to Judaism.

Zoroaster, Founder of the Faith

- Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion of Iran, though it's difficult to know just how ancient.
 - The earliest literary references are from the Greeks and Persians in the 5th century B.C.E. They traced the roots of the faith to priest named Zoroaster (the Greek transliteration of Zarathustra), and both scholars and believers long assumed that he lived sometime in the 6th century B.C.E.
 - However, nearly everything we know of Zoroaster's life comes from 17 hymns he wrote that have been preserved in the Avesta, the most important sacred text of the religion. The language of these texts suggests that Zoroaster probably lived between 1500 and 1200 B.C.E., perhaps about the time of Moses.
- As a priest, Zoroaster mastered the rituals dedicated to the various gods, but at the age of 30, he saw a vision of Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord"), whom he perceived to be the creator, the most powerful god, and the only one worthy of worship. The god of evil was Angra Mainyu, also known as Ahriman. Zoroastrianism seems to be the earliest religion to explain the world in dualistic terms, with

humans caught in a cosmic conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

History of Zoroastrianism

- The Avesta is the most revered scripture of Zoroastrianism. It is about 1,000 pages and is divided into four major parts.
 - The Yasna consists of 72 hymns that are recited in sequence at the *yasna* ceremony, where praises and offerings are directed to various divinities and the sacred hoama plant. It also includes the 17 Gathas, which were thought to have been composed by Zoroaster himself. The language of the Yasna is Old Avestan and seems to date back to the 2nd millennium B.C.E.
 - The second major section of the Avesta is known as the Yashts—21 prose hymns and prayers to various divinities, written in Younger Avestan. These may date to the time of the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire (550–330 B.C.E.).
 - Even later are the Visperad—24 hymns that are chanted in conjunction with the Yasna—and the Vendidad—22 chapters of myths and codes of religious regulations, put in the form of conversations between Zoroaster and Ahura Mazda. The Vendidad includes two creation myths and the story of how Angra Mainyu once tried to kill Zoroaster, along with criminal and civil laws and rules about purification.
- As with Hindu scriptures, these texts were originally oral compositions, and they continued as such for a long time. If Zoroaster lived sometime around 1500–1200 B.C.E., Zoroastrianism as a religion seems to have become popular only during the Achaemenid Empire.
- According to later Zoroastrian sources, when Alexander the Great conquered the Persians in 330 B.C.E., he killed many Zoroastrian priests and, thus, destroyed most of their memorized scriptures. For this reason, the Avesta we have today is perhaps only a quarter of its original length.

- After Alexander, Persia was ruled by the Greek Seleucids, but with the Arsacid (Parthian) Empire (247 B.C.E.–224 C.E.), Zoroastrianism made a comeback. The next rulers of Persia, the Sassanids (224–651), declared Zoroastrianism their official religion. Under the Sassanids, the Avesta was first transcribed into written form, in a specially created alphabet called Avestan, in the 4th or 5th centuries. Our oldest extant manuscripts of Zoroastrian scripture date to the 14th century.
- When Muslim armies conquered Persia in the 7th century, they treated Zoroastrians with a measure of tolerance as one of the peoples of the book, like Jews and Christians. Even though Zoroaster is never mentioned in the Qur'an, many Muslims believed that he was one of the prophets who preceded Muhammad.
 - Under Muslim rule, in the 9th and 10th centuries, a series of Zoroastrian texts was composed in the language of Pahlavi, or Middle Persian.
 - The Pahlavi books are not considered scripture, but they are nevertheless sacred literature and are some of our major sources for understanding Zoroastrianism.
- Over the centuries of Muslim rule in Iran, pressure to convert to Islam increased, and at some point, in the 8th or perhaps the 10th century, a group of Zoroastrians migrated to the west coast of India, near modern Mumbai. They became known as the Parsis, and today, most of the Zoroastrians in the world are Indian Parsis.

Contents of the Avesta

- In 1771, the French scholar Abraham Anquetil-Duperron published the first Western translation of what he called the Zend-Avesta, which is the Avesta as interpreted in Pahlavi.
 - As Western scholars started to decipher Sanskrit, they discovered that the Old Avestan language was closer to Sanskrit than it was to Pahlavi, and as they made progress in understanding the Vedas, they also found that they could make sense of the Avesta.

- A three-volume translation of the Avesta was published as part of Max Müller's Sacred Books of the East, and the series also included five volumes of translations from the later Pahlavi literature of Zoroastrianism.
- What attracted the most attention were the Gathas—the 17 oldest hymns in the Avesta that went back to Zoroaster himself. These sacred texts are difficult to understand and interpret. Avestan is such an old language that translations are often only tentative, the language can be cryptic, and the theology is quite foreign.
- The 17 hymns of the Gathas are organized into five sections. In the first, Zoroaster praises Ahura Mazda and the six *amesha spenta* ("bounteous immortals"). He then pleads to the ox soul for help against the cruelty of the wicked. Mazda appoints Zoroaster as the ox's guardian, but the ox soul complains that Zoroaster is powerless. Zoroaster himself then pleads for aid in fulfilling his assignment; he desires divine knowledge.
- The hymn describes the dualistic world: "The primeval spirits as a pair combined their opposite strivings [Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu], yet each is independent in his action. ... One is better, the other worse, in thought, in word, and in deed" (Mills, trans.). In the conflict between good and evil, humans can freely choose a side, and eventually, heaven or hell will be their reward. The phrase "good thoughts, good words, good deeds" eventually became a popular summary of Zoroastrian ethics.
- Many of the Gathas consist of dialogues between Zoroaster and Ahura Mazda, and they tend to stay on a rather abstract, spiritual plane. In later Zoroastrian texts, many of the ideas from the Gathas are developed further, such as the concept of a bridge over which souls must cross to enter the world of the dead.

Two-Way Influence

- Scholars debate exactly what sort of influence Zoroastrianism had on other religions, but the basic ideas of Zoroaster certainly appear to have had an impact on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
 - For instance, it is not clear from the Torah what exactly awaits us after death. This is why the Sadducees, in the 1st century B.C.E., denied the doctrines of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection, while other Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees, developed more detailed teachings. The fact that Jews had lived under Persian rule for two centuries and, thus, had been in contact with Zoroastrians may have spurred such thinking.
 - Zoroastrian dualism and apocalypticism also made their way into the Dead Sea Scrolls and Christianity. The wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem, according to the Gospel of Matthew, were magi, that is, Zoroastrian priests. The word *paradise* comes from ancient Iran, where it meant “an enclosed garden,” and both the word and the concept of a garden-like heaven were incorporated into Christianity and Islam.
 - Two Zoroastrian deities appear in the Qur’an as fallen angels, and Islam has a concept of a bridge that is as thin as a hair and as sharp as a knife by which souls enter paradise.
- Even though today Zoroastrianism is a religion in danger of extinction, it has nevertheless left its mark on the majority of the world’s population. But the influence goes both ways.
 - By the time Zoroastrians put the Avesta into written form, after centuries of oral transmission, Jews and Christians had created their canons and become peoples of the book. Having a written sacred text that could be preserved and copied seemed like an integral part of a religious tradition.
 - During the Sassanid era, there was an offshoot of Zoroastrianism called Zurvanism that looked more like monotheism than dualism, and in later centuries, Zoroastrians



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Zoroastrians believed that burial would pollute the earth; thus, they built towers of silence where corpses were exposed to be eaten by vultures.

developed the notion of a Saoshyant, a savior-like figure who would come at the end of the world to usher in a new age.

- Frequently, religions influence one another through challenge and competition. In the 1830s, John Wilson, a Christian missionary from Scotland, arrived in Bombay (now Mumbai) and began to criticize Parsi beliefs and scriptures. Wilson's criticism inspired a reform movement, in which some Parsis attempted to make their religion look more like Western models.
- The 20th century saw strong disagreements between reform and orthodox Parsis. Traditionalists had long seen the essence of the faith as keeping ritual purity and participating in initiation rituals, daily prayers, seasonal festivals, and temple worship. Theology was of lesser significance; the religion was more like an ethnicity than a set of doctrines.
- Earlier, we mentioned the term *Protestant bias*, and we can see it on display in our own discussion of Zoroastrianism: a focus on the founder of the faith, the notion that the earliest scriptures are the purest expression of the faith, and so on. But this perspective is not

the only way to understand Zoroastrianism. Religions tend to be rich, multifaceted phenomena; they are often ways of life rather than simply lists of beliefs. And one of the benefits of studying varied religions is their ability to make us aware of our own assumptions.

Suggested Reading

Boyce, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*.

———, *Zoroastrians*.

Darmsteter, trans., *The Zend-Avesta*.

Duchesne-Guillemin, trans., *The Hymns of Zarathustra*.

Rose, *Zoroastrianism*.

Skjærvø, trans. and ed., *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*.

Stausberg, *Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism*.

West, trans., *Pahlavi Texts*.

Questions to Consider

1. What influence has Zoroastrianism had on major religions of the West?
2. What is the story of the survival and translation of the Avesta—one of the oldest sacred texts in the world?

The Three Baskets of Buddhism

Lecture 13

There are about 400 million Buddhists in the world, mostly in Southeast Asia and East Asia but also in Europe and North America. The Buddhist canon of scripture is huge, running to more than 100,000 pages. Buddhists call their canon the Tripitaka, which means “Three Baskets.” These are the Vinaya (rules for monks and nuns), the Suttas (discourses of the Buddha), and the Abhidharma (“higher teachings,” that is, works of systematic philosophy). Buddhism also has several well-defined sets of texts: the Pali canon, Chinese canon, and Tibetan canon. In this lecture, we’ll learn the basic divisions and origins of the Buddhist canon, then take a closer look at specific texts in the four lectures that follow.

Oral Origins of the Buddhist Canon

- Siddhartha Gautama, the northern Indian prince who became the Buddha, lived in the 5th century B.C.E. After his enlightenment under a bodhi tree, he wandered about for 45 years, preaching the Four Noble Truths and related doctrines about the nature of reality, causation and interconnectedness, and the workings of the human mind.
- The Buddha never wrote anything down, but he gathered around him disciples, who gave up ordinary life to become monks and nuns; they listened intently and memorized the sermons they heard him teach.
- When the Buddha died, around 480 B.C.E., he didn’t appoint a successor; instead, he indicated that the movement should follow the dharma and the Vinaya. Thus, the word of the Buddha became paramount. But there were difficulties almost immediately. For example, shortly before his death, the Buddha had told Ananda, one of his chief disciples, that the minor rules for monks could be eliminated, but because he didn’t specify which rules were the minor ones, the disciples hesitated to change anything.

- At the first three-month retreat season after the Buddha's death, his followers held their initial council. Some 500 enlightened monks gathered together for a communal recitation of the Buddha's words. The Vinaya were first recited by Upali, a former barber. Then, Ananda recited the Suttas—tens of thousands of words—without missing a syllable. Even now, all the Buddhist suttas begin “Thus have I heard,” connecting each one with Ananda's firsthand account.

The Pali Canon

- The oral transmission of the Buddha's teachings continued for several centuries. During that time, there arose 18 different schools of Buddhism, each with a somewhat different set of memorized, authoritative texts.
 - Eventually, all the early schools disappeared, with the exception of the Theravada school (“Teachings of the Elders”).
 - Perhaps one of the reasons for the survival of this particular form of early Buddhism was the fact that these believers managed to preserve their scriptures in written form, although not in India but on the island of Sri Lanka.
- The Buddhist scriptures were first brought to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century B.C.E. by monks who had memorized them. Two centuries later, in 29 B.C.E., a king in Sri Lanka, fearing that too many monks would die in political turmoil and famine, called for a council of Theravada monks. Five hundred scribes wrote down the scriptures they recited in Pali, an old Indian language that was closely related to the dialect in which the Buddha had originally taught.
- The Pali canon is the oldest surviving set of Buddhist scriptures. It included six volumes of the Vinaya, with rules for monks and nuns and commentaries on the rules. The second basket consisted of the Suttas in 36 volumes. These are arranged in five collections (*nikayas*), mostly by length. The last section, the Little Texts, contains some of the most popular Buddhist texts, including the Dhammapadam and the Jataka, stories of the Buddha's previous lives.

- The Pali canon was rounded out by six volumes of the Abhidharma, in seven texts. These “higher teachings” include analysis and commentary on various lists in the Vinaya and Suttas, with no stories, illustrations, or anecdotes. This basket systematizes Buddhist teachings about psychology and philosophy, constituent elements of reality or the mind, and causation. For the most part, the Abhidharma was developed in the centuries after the Buddha’s death.
- The Pali canon, with its numerous lists and repetitions, appears to have been shaped for memorization. The sounds of the Pali texts were eventually transcribed into various Southeast Asian regional scripts, such as Sinhalese, Burmese, Thai, and Khmer. There is even a transliteration of the Pali canon into Roman letters, accompanied by an English translation—a project that was begun in 1881 and is still ongoing.

Chinese and Tibetan Canons

- In the 1st century B.C.E., new Buddhist sutras began to circulate. These texts were written in Sanskrit, the classical language of India, and offered a somewhat different view of Buddhism.
 - The Buddha was now considered a god to be worshipped rather than a man who had found enlightenment and then passed from this existence into nirvana; there was more emphasis on bodhisattvas; and salvation was thought to be available to anyone, not just monks and nuns. This was Mahayana Buddhism, or the “Greater Vehicle.”
 - These sutras were longer and more philosophically sophisticated, with even more miraculous elements than those of the Theravada school. They also originated as written literature rather than oral teachings.
- In the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E., Buddhist missionaries began to travel from India to China, and they took with them some of these new scriptures, along with older scriptures from the Theravada and other early schools. Efforts to translate these scriptures into Chinese started in about the 2nd century and continued for 800 years. The

Chinese canon eventually stabilized in about the 10th century, when printed copies began to become available.

- In the standard, punctuated edition of the Chinese canon, published in Japan in the 1920s, there are 55 volumes of the Tripitaka, plus another 45 supplementary volumes.
 - The Chinese canon includes Chinese translations of five versions of the Vinaya from schools other than the Theravada, a version of the Abhidharma, many Mahayana sutras, Tantras (esoteric texts), commentaries, treatises, encyclopedias, dictionaries, histories, and even some non-Buddhist texts from Hinduism and Nestorian Christianity.
 - We often have Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist scriptures for which the originals have completely disappeared.
- From the 7th to the 13th centuries, there were translations of Buddhist scripture into Tibetan, and eventually, a separate Tibetan canon was established in the 14th century, with two major divisions: the Kangyur, which consists of texts attributed to the Buddha and translated from Sanskrit originals (98 volumes), and the Tengyur, 224 volumes of commentaries and treatises. Most of these were also translated from Sanskrit.

Effects of an Extensive Canon

- Obviously, the sacred texts of Buddhism play a different role in that religion than the Bible does in Judaism or Christianity. Ordinary believers are not expected to be familiar with the entire canon, and even monks and nuns—some of whom devote their lives to scriptural scholarship—can master only a small portion of the whole.
- For many centuries, Buddhists had an open canon, to which new books and perspectives could be added. This sense of continuing revelation and deepening understanding was exhilarating to many, but the profusion of Buddhist scripture could also be confusing. Different schools of Buddhism focused on particular texts, and there was a realization that the canon was full of inconsistencies.

- Buddhism, like most other religious traditions, also encompasses a number of paradoxes or contradictions. These do not discredit or delegitimize the faith; rather, they function as creative tensions that impel believers toward greater searching and dedication.

The Significance of Sacred Texts

- Despite the size of the Buddhist canon, any discussion of it is pervaded by a sense of impermanence and loss. The scriptures were originally written on dried palm leaves that were quite fragile, particularly in the tropical climates of South and Southeast Asia. The Theravada Pali canon survived in such manuscripts, but the scriptures of other early schools have not.
 - For example, in 1994, the British Library acquired 80 Buddhist manuscript fragments, dating to the 1st century C.E. These are the oldest surviving Buddhist writings in the world.
 - They are not Theravada texts but seem to be a tiny fraction of the canon of the Dharmaguptaka school. Such discoveries are a poignant reminder of how much has been lost.
- Some Buddhists, concerned about the perishability of palm leaf manuscripts and paper, turned to more durable substances. In caves in Fangshan County, 45 miles southwest of Beijing, there are more than 14,000 stone slabs inscribed with texts from the Chinese Buddhist canon. This massive project was begun by monks and laypersons in the 7th century and eventually gained governmental support in the 11th and 12th centuries.
- Similarly, the world's largest book is written, not on paper, but on 730 marble tablets, each tablet



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The Kuthodaw Pagoda in Mandalay, Burma houses the world's largest book, text from the Pali canon inscribed on marble tablets.

housed in a pagoda in a massive array at the Kuthodaw Pagoda in Mandalay, Burma. These tablets represent a copy of the Pali canon commissioned by the king of Burma in 1860.

- Buddhists in East Asia, seeking to preserve and propagate their scriptures, were the first to adopt the new technology of printing. In 764, the Japanese Empress Kōken commissioned the printing of 1 million copies of a brief Buddhist chant, each housed in a portable wooden pagoda, some of which have survived to this day.
- The world's earliest printed book, produced in 868, is a copy of the Diamond Sutra found at Dunhuang, a way station on the ancient Silk Road in northwest China. It had been walled up in a secret vault in a cave temple, along with thousands of other manuscripts, around the year 1000 and was rediscovered in 1900. The 16-foot-long scroll predated Gutenberg's Bible by almost 600 years and is today housed in the British Library.
- These printing projects, like the many Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan editions of the Buddhist canon that followed, were motivated by a desire to preserve the scriptures, to make them more widely available, to show compassion to others, and to gain merit for the next life. Yet in good Buddhist fashion, this merit was not always for oneself. The Diamond Sutra from Dunhuang ends with a colophon noting that it was made in memory of a believer's parents. Often, the significance of sacred texts lies not just in the contents of the books but also in what they meant to the people who created and used them.

Suggested Reading

Denny and Taylor, eds., *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*.

Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*.

Holm, ed., *Sacred Writings*.

Mitchell, *Buddhism*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the Three Baskets of Buddhist scripture differ from the three Buddhist canons?
2. Why would a religion so focused on the impermanence of all things put so much effort into the preservation of sacred texts?

Vinaya and Jataka

Lecture 14

In a religious tradition with a large canon, some texts naturally get more attention than others. In this lecture, we'll discuss two types of Buddhist scriptures that are used with great frequency but in different ways. The first type, Pratimoksha, the rules of the order, in the Vinaya basket, is used nearly exclusively by monks and nuns. The second type, Jataka, or birth stories, has been beloved by ordinary believers for centuries and constitutes a subsection within the Sutra basket. We'll also look for details of the Buddha's life that can be gleaned from various sacred compositions.

The Vinaya

- In its early centuries, Buddhism was not a religion based on its founder. Siddhartha Gautama, the Indian prince who would become the Buddha, was thought to have discovered and shown to others the path to spiritual freedom and nonsuffering, but he wasn't the path himself. As a result, the first biographies of the Buddha were not written until the 1st century C.E., some 500 years after his death.
- Bits and pieces of the Buddha's life were recorded in various sacred compositions within a specific teaching context. Some of the earliest of these oral scriptures eventually became the Vinaya, the regulations for the sangha, that is, the community of Buddhist monks and nuns. There is a long list of rules, as well as texts that describe how the behavioral guidelines and ceremonies came about.
- One particular composition, the Mahavagga, begins by describing the origins of the sangha, with a story that begins shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment under a bodhi tree.
 - The Buddha decided to share his newfound knowledge with the five men who had been his companions earlier. He saw in vision that they were living in a deer park near Benares (now known as Varanasi); thus, he traveled 150 miles to seek them out.

- He announced to these men that he had discovered the middle way between a life of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Then, in this first sermon, he taught the Four Noble Truths.
- The first truth is that the “fivefold clinging” to existence is suffering. The second truth is that the cause of suffering is desire. The third is that the cessation of suffering comes from stopping desire. And the fourth truth is that the path to the cessation of suffering is the Eightfold Path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
- The Buddha goes on to explain that “fivefold clinging” refers to the Buddhist idea that there is no self or *atman*; instead, all sentient beings are composed of five *skandhas*, or aggregates—body, sensations, perceptions, psychic dispositions, and consciousness—which are temporarily connected and constantly changing. There is no eternal, unchanging soul.
- This is a wonderfully concise restatement of the basic message of Buddhism, but the point of this particular text is not just doctrine; it’s about the origins of the community of monks, which is as essential to Buddhism as any specific beliefs. The Mahavagga goes on to report that each of the five ascetics became enlightened upon hearing the words of the Buddha and was immediately ordained by him. From then on, monks ordained by the Buddha ordained other monks, who in turn, ordained others in an unbroken succession that has continued for more than 2,500 years.
- All Buddhists strive to live by the Five Precepts: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxicants. Buddhist monks and nuns, beginning as novices, adopt five additional restrictions (in addition to celibacy): no eating after noon; no singing, dancing, or attending shows; no perfumes, cosmetics, or decorative accessories; no sleeping in luxurious beds; and no accepting money. Eventually, these rules became elaborated into a lengthy code called the Pratimoksha.

The Pratimoksha

- Buddhist monks and nuns give up home, family, and possessions and wander about or reside in a monastery, begging for the basic necessities of life while devoting themselves to spiritual matters. They are supported by donations from ordinary believers, and in return, they preach the dharma, that is, the principles of Buddhism. Without the oversight and responsibilities that come with family life, they are a vulnerable group, subject to temptations and difficulties.
- The Buddha, recognizing their special needs, mandated that twice a month, monks and nuns would gather (separately) to recite the Pratimoksha, which is a list of rules regulating their behavior. The idea is that this is a time to confess any sins or mistakes; silence is taken as a sign of continuing purity.
- There are eight sections to the Pratimoksha, and at the end of each, the monks recite the words of the Buddha: “In respect to [these rules] I ask the venerable ones, ‘Are you pure in this matter?’ A second time I ask the venerable ones, ‘Are you pure in this matter?’ A third time I ask the venerable ones, ‘Are you pure in this matter?’ The venerable ones are pure herein. Therefore do they keep silence.”
- The eight categories of offenses are arranged according to severity, from those that require expulsion (sexual intercourse, theft, killing of humans, and false claims of supernatural powers), through probation, forfeiture, and so on.
- As with many sacred texts, it’s not just the words that are important but also the ceremony.
 - For monks, the ceremony serves as a reaffirmation of their values and commitment, a check on one another, and an aid to mindfulness; it also increases awareness of the Three Poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion. Finally, the ceremony and the rules preserve the harmony of the sangha and enable spiritual progress.

- For laypersons, the ceremony assures them that the monks are worthy of donations, that they are self-disciplined and trustworthy in every way, and that they are following tradition. The Pratimoksha requires regular contact between the sangha and laity, but these interactions are carefully regulated. The sangha is dependent on the lay community and vice versa.



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- For outsiders, it's remarkable to note the success of the sangha—a self-perpetuating social organization with no leader—and the practicality of the Pratimoksha. These rules don't seem to include any arbitrary taboos, as can be found in other religious traditions, and there's no notion that the regulations were revealed from on high. Rather, they were developed over the course of the Buddha's lifetime in response to various situations and questions.

Unlike Christianity, where celibate priests and nuns are not part of every branch of the faith, in Buddhism, the sangha—the community of monks and nuns—is at the core.

Buddhist Nuns

- Three versions of the Vinaya are in use today, one for each of the major Buddhist traditions, and the Pratimoksha in each is slightly different, although in all three versions, there are more rules for nuns.
 - The Buddha was originally reluctant to allow women to leave their homes and families and join the sangha, but he was persuaded to do so on the condition that nuns accept eight rules that subordinated them to monks.
 - His foster mother, Maha Pajapati, accepted these constraints and was ordained, along with 500 other devout women.

- There was never any doubt that women could progress spiritually and even achieve full enlightenment, but the Buddha seems to have worried about the vulnerability and respectability of females living independently at a time when it was thought that women needed male protection and guidance. He was also concerned that the common people might be suspicious of a celibate monastic community that included both men and women. Nevertheless, he gradually granted nuns the right to recite the Pratimoksha apart from monks and confess their wrongdoings to other nuns rather than to monks.
- The order of nuns continues to thrive in the Mahayana countries of East Asia, but the order in Theravada Buddhism mostly died out between the 11th and 13th centuries. Still, there are devout, celibate women in Theravada Buddhism who leave their families, shave their heads, and live by the Ten Precepts but aren't full nuns.

Jataka Stories

- The Jataka stories appear in the Little Texts subsection of the Sutra basket. According to tradition, as the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree seeking enlightenment, he went through a series of ever-deepening meditative states, one of which allowed him to view his past lives. In his post-enlightenment preaching, the Buddha sometimes drew on these recovered memories to make moral points, talking about something that happened when he was a king, a commoner, or even an animal.
- There are 547 Jataka stories in the Theravada canon. The story of the goose with the golden feathers and the greedy wife, told within the frame of a problem caused by a greedy nun, is similar to Aesop's tale of the goose that laid golden eggs. In fact, some scholars have speculated that this story came to Greece from India, along with several other Jataka tales.
- Each of these stories from the Buddha's previous lives teaches a simple lesson in Buddhist morality. The tales include the story of a woodpecker who risked his life to help a lion; an elephant

who threw himself off a cliff to feed a group of people who were starving; and a monkey king who stretched out his body like a bridge so that his fellow monkeys, under attack from humans, could scramble across him to safety.

- One of the most inspiring, or perhaps most troubling, of the Jataka stories is the tale of the Buddha's last incarnation before he became Siddhartha Gautama.
 - At that time, the Buddha was born as a prince named Vessantara, who was extraordinarily, even dangerously generous. He gave away a magic rain-making elephant to a neighboring kingdom that was suffering from drought, and his people were so unhappy with him that he was forced to take his family into exile. Before he left, he gave away most of the royal treasury to the poor. On the road, he gave away the four horses that pulled his carriage; then he gave away the carriage.
 - A poor, greedy Brahman asked Vessantara for his two children to be his servants, and though he knew the Brahman would not treat them well, Vessantara nevertheless ignored his own feelings and handed them over.
 - One of the gods, worried that Vessantara would give away his wife next, disguised himself as a beggar and asked for her. Of course, Vessantara agreed, though the god immediately revealed his true nature, returned the wife, and tricked the cruel Brahman into leading the children back to their royal grandparents in the capital.
 - The Brahman was rewarded richly for returning the children, but he died of overeating within a few days. At last, Vessantara was welcomed home to the capital, reunited with his family, and crowned king.

Suggested Reading

Cowell, ed., *The Jataka*,

Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

Khoroché, trans., *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey*.

Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, trans., *Vinaya Texts*.

Questions to Consider

1. How has the Vinaya been crucial in making the Buddhist sangha (monks and nuns) the longest continuously existing social organization in the world?
2. Why have stories of the Buddha's previous lives, including times when he took the form of animals, become so important in teaching the principles of Buddhism?

Theravada Sutras

Lecture 15

In this lecture, we'll discuss some of the most famous and significant sacred texts in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. Theravada was one of the 18 early schools of Buddhism and the only one to survive to the present day, mostly in Southeast Asia. There are two other major divisions within Buddhism: the Mahayana and Vajrayana. The main differences among the three traditions are in some ways analogous to Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy in Christianity, except the different types of Buddhists have traditionally gotten along much better than Catholics and Protestants. In this lecture and the next two, we'll explore the sacred texts of each of these schools.

Buddhist Traditions

- Theravada ("Teachings of the Elders") is the oldest surviving form of Buddhism, and its followers number about 125 million, mostly in Southeast Asia. They believe that the Buddha was a man who gained enlightenment, then passed into nirvana; thus, there is nothing left of him to worship.
 - Believers must follow the path that the Buddha took, but in practical terms, only monks and nuns are able put in the time necessary for study and meditation or to abandon all earthly attachments in a way that will achieve enlightenment.
 - The characteristic scriptures of Theravada Buddhism are in the Pali language.
- The term *Mahayana* means the "Greater Vehicle," and this form of Buddhism teaches that all believers, not just monks and nuns, are capable of enlightenment. This form of Buddhism dominates East Asia (China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan) and claims more than 185 million believers.

- Mahayana Buddhists believe that the Buddha was a god rather than just a spiritually advanced man, and they put a great deal of emphasis on bodhisattvas—beings who achieve enlightenment but choose to remain in the world system rather than entering nirvana. The bodhisattvas vow that they will enter nirvana only after all other sentient beings have been enlightened. These are Buddhist divinities to whom one can pray.
- Mahayana Buddhism, which began in about the 1st century C.E., includes many schools (similar to Protestant denominations), such as the emptiness school of Madhyamika, the consciousness-only school of Yogacara, and several distinctive schools of Japanese Buddhism, including Zen. The Mahayana scriptures were originally composed in Sanskrit, though they were eventually translated into Chinese and Tibetan.
- Vajrayana (“Thunderbolt”) Buddhism is by far the smallest of the three Buddhist traditions, with about 20 million adherents. Nevertheless, its prominence in Tibetan culture, which includes a reverence for the Dalai Lama, has brought it a great deal of attention in the West. This form of Buddhism builds on various Mahayana schools but adds many Tantric texts that introduce various ritual shortcuts for attaining Buddhahood, including mantras, mudras, mandalas, and visualizations.
- There are different versions of the Vinaya for Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhists, but the differences are minor. The most striking contrasts are to be found in the largest section of the Three Baskets—the Sutras.

Samyutta Nikaya: “Connected Discourses”

- In the Pali canon of the Theravadas, there are five subsections in the Sutra basket: 34 Long Discourses, 150 Middle-Length Discourses, several thousand Connected Discourses and Enumerated Discourses, and 15 Little Texts, which offer a plethora of miscellaneous writings. Most of these sacred texts were intended for monks and nuns.

- In one of the Connected Discourses, for example, the Buddha explains to an ascetic, Kassapa, that suffering is not created by oneself or by others, and it does not simply arise without being created. Kassapa's mistake, according to the Buddha, is to assume that there is a self that is responsible for suffering.
- The Buddha then offers an alternative analysis of causation, in which suffering is the result of the cycle of conditioned arising (sometimes known as dependent origination). The 12 conditions arise from ignorance—the origin of suffering. The Buddha breaks the weak link in the chain—ignorance—by achieving enlightenment.
- There are some profound ideas in this discourse about causation and the elusiveness of individual identity, but the sutra perhaps means more to a devoted Buddhist than to an outsider. However, there are several other texts that have been powerful in the lives of laity and may even mean something to non-Buddhist seekers of wisdom.

The Therigatha

- The Therigatha ("Verses of the Elder Nuns") consists of 73 poems in which nuns recount how they became enlightened. This is the world's earliest known collection of women's literature, with poems supposedly written in the 5th century B.C.E.
- A typical example was composed by Vaddhesi, a woman who was a nurse to Maha Pajapati, the Buddha's foster mother. She speaks of trying and failing—day after day, for 25 years—to calm her mind and overcome desire.
- A more famous nun is Kisa Gotami, whose story has been retold in many versions over the centuries. After the death of her son, half-mad with grief, she asks the Buddha for medicine to make the boy well. He teaches her, however, that her grief is not unique—death is an inescapable part of life. She finally buries her son and asks the Buddha to be ordained a nun. Kisa Gotami became well respected

for her spiritual insight and poetry, and in time, she escaped the sorrows of this world and passed into nirvana.

The Dhammapada

- The Dhammapada (“Verse of the Buddha’s Teachings”) is probably the most famous of all Theravada scriptures, and it also comes from the Little Text section of the Sutra basket. Even though the Pali canon tends to be focused on monks, the Dhammapada has ethical advice and inspiration for all Buddhists.
- The Dhammapada consists of 423 verses, divided into 26 sections, and includes no extended arguments or complicated doctrinal formulations. It has been loved and memorized by both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists for more than 2,000 years. The prominence of the Dhammapada in Asia made it one of the first Buddhist texts to be translated into English.
- We can get a sense of the book’s contents by simply looking over the 26 section headings, which include such titles as “Thought,” “The Fool,” “The Wise Man,” “Old Age,” “Self,” “The World,” “Happiness,” “Pleasure,” “Anger,” and “The Way.” In general, its themes concern moral action, the fleeting nature of life, self-mastery, and warnings about desire. Some of its teachings refer to specifically Buddhist doctrines, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Three Refuges, but much of it might be applicable to almost anyone’s life.
- The Dhammapada tends to sound like a book of proverbs. Buddhists have long considered each one a saying of the Buddha himself, and later commentators provided collections of anecdotes that gave the story behind each saying. For example, the tale of Kisa Gotami was thought to be the basis for verse 287: “As a great flood carries off a sleeping village, death carries off the person whose mind is distracted, intoxicated by possessions and children” (Wallis).
- Verse 276 on individual effort reads: “It is you who must make the effort. The masters [i.e., the Buddhas] only point the way. But

if you meditate and follow the law, you will free yourself from desire” (Byrom).

- One of the things that is most striking about Theravada Buddhism is that it is not a savior religion. The Buddha can’t rescue anyone from the consequences of karma or give someone enlightenment. People must do these things for themselves. The Buddha can only show the way.
- There’s a tough-minded realism here that may be attractive to some people in our own scientific, skeptical age. Of course, Buddhism is an ancient religion, and in the earliest texts, there is talk of miracles, gods, demons, and superhuman powers, but there is also a streak of practical empiricism that is worth considering.

Discourse to the Kalamas

- The Discourse to the Kalamas begins with Ananda reciting, “Thus have I heard”; he then tells the story of a time when the Buddha, traveling with a large number of monks, arrived at the town of Kesaputta. The inhabitants there, members of the Kalama clan, came out to greet him because they had heard reports of the Buddha’s wisdom and spiritual attainments.
- But the Kalamas had a question. Many holy men, ascetics, and sages had come through their town, and each of them had praised his own doctrines while condemning the teachings of others. How, the Kalamas asked, can they tell the difference between truth and falsehood?
- The Buddha tells the Kalamas that it is appropriate to have doubts or to be perplexed. That in itself is worth noting, because some religions put a premium on faith and discourage questioning. The Buddha then continues with these famous words:

Do not accept a thing by recollection [repeated hearing], by tradition, by mere report, because it is based on the authority of scriptures, by mere logic or inference, by reflection on conditions,

Selections from the Dhammapada

The dangers of giving in to desire:

He who lives looking for pleasures only, his senses uncontrolled, immoderate in his food, idle, and weak, Mara (the tempter) will certainly overthrow him, as the wind throws down a weak tree. (7, Muller)

Disciplining one's mind:

The wise man guards his mind which is unruly and ever in search of pleasure. The mind well-guarded brings great happiness. (36, Austin, in Humphries)

Impermanence:

A fool is troubled, thinking, "I have sons; I have wealth"; but even himself doesn't belong to himself—let alone sons, let alone wealth. (62, Roebuck)

Karma:

Whosoever offends a harmless, pure and innocent person, the evil falls back upon that fool, like light dust thrown up against the wind. (125, Babbitt)

How we should treat others:

Conquer anger through gentleness, unkindness through kindness, greed through generosity, and falsehood by truth. (223, Easwaran)

The superiority of Buddhism:

The best of paths is the path of eight. The best of truths, the four sayings. The best of states, freedom from passions [nirvana]. The best of men, the one who sees. (273, Mascaro)

Individual effort:

It is you who must make the effort. The masters [i.e., the Buddhas] only point the way. But if you meditate and follow the law, you will free yourself from desire. (276, Byrom)

because of reflection on or fondness for a certain theory, because it merely seems suitable, nor thinking: “The religious wanderer is respected by us.” (Holder)

- The Buddha then tells the Kalamas how they can know not what to accept but what to reject: “But when you know for yourselves: ‘These things are unwholesome, blameworthy, reproached by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to harm and suffering’—these you should reject” (Holder). In other words, he tells them that they should base their beliefs on personal experience and direct observation.
- The Buddha follows up by introducing the Kalamas to the doctrine of the Three Poisons—that suffering and sorrow in this world have three basic roots: greed, hatred, and ignorance. Then he suggests that they can know what to accept by looking for the opposites: things that are wholesome, unblameworthy, commended by the wise, and when put into practice, lead to benefit and happiness. These sorts of things will lead to an untroubled mind, pure and free from hatred.
- In other words, the Buddha says that we don’t have to believe his teachings because they are traditional, scriptural, popular, or reasonable or because the Buddha himself is well known. Instead, we should try out the practices he recommends—the Five Precepts, kindness, meditation, self-mastery, detachment—and see if they bring good results. In fact, he goes on to say that whether there is an afterlife or not, this is still a good way to live.
- It seems as if Buddhism is a religion that would be well-suited for our modern Western ideas of individual autonomy—the freedom to choose and to act—but then the Buddha undercuts it all with a paradox. He suggests that there is no self that chooses or acts. Later Buddhists, in the Mahayana tradition, will heighten this contradiction by arguing that there is also no nirvana, no samsara, no salvation, and even no Buddha.

Suggested Reading

Burt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*.

Gethin, *Sayings of the Buddha*.

Holder, trans., *Early Buddhist Discourses*.

Murcott, trans., *The First Buddhist Women*.

Rhys Davids, trans., *Psalms of the Sisters*.

Roebuck, trans., *The Dhammapada*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the world's earliest anthology of women's literature become part of the Buddhist canon?
2. What has made the Dhammapada the most popular text in Theravada Buddhism, that is, the oldest surviving branch of the religion?

Mahayana Sutras

Lecture 16

The Mahayana division of Buddhism, predominant in East Asia, is the largest today. Mahayana Buddhists worship the Buddha as a god, look to bodhisattvas for assistance, and think that enlightenment can be attained by ordinary believers—not just monks and nuns—in this lifetime. This form of Buddhism had its origins between 100 B.C.E. and 100 C.E., when new sacred texts began to appear anonymously, texts that offered a slightly different take on the teachings of the Buddha. The origins of Mahayana Buddhism may have had something to do with the decision to commit the Theravada scriptures to writing in the 1st century B.C.E., giving the texts more of an independent life and making them more accessible to laypersons.

Perfection of Wisdom Sutras

- The earliest Mahayana sutras were concerned with the perfection of wisdom. These claimed to offer deeper insights into the meaning of the Buddha's teachings, or dharma. The first of these texts seems to have been the Sutra of Perfect Wisdom in 8,000 Lines. There were later versions in 18,000 lines, 25,000 lines, and even 100,000 lines.
- These sutras all purport to convey the words of the Buddha, and they explain the ways in which being a bodhisattva is superior to being a disciple. Ordinary disciples are assumed to simply want to gain enlightenment and escape the cycle of suffering for themselves, while bodhisattvas become enlightened and then renounce nirvana until they have assisted every other sentient being in attaining the same liberation. They undertake this great act of self-sacrifice for the good of others, exhibiting "perfect compassion."
- Six perfections characterize bodhisattvas: perfect generosity, perfect morality, perfect patience, perfect exertion, perfect meditation, and perfect wisdom. Taking a vow to become a bodhisattva is enough to get one started on the bodhisattva path and to begin working on the

perfections. The idea is to aim for enlightenment but not for selfish reasons; instead, bodhisattvas seek to end the suffering of all beings throughout the universe.

- Perfect wisdom, which is attained by meditation rather than by logical analysis, means seeing things as they actually are. In Mahayana Buddhism, this means recognizing that reality is beyond language and beyond such human concepts as being and nonbeing.
 - Indeed, nothing has a “self-existence,” or a permanent identity or form. Instead, meditation leads one to an intuitive understanding that all things are intrinsically empty—empty of a permanent essence or self-existence. There’s nothing really there, which means that there is nothing to hold on to or desire.
 - Taken to its logical limit, perfect wisdom means that there is ultimately no such thing as the Buddha, the Eightfold Path, bodhisattvas, or even enlightenment. All such phenomena are empty.
- Sometimes, the wisdom sutras can be rather obtuse, and they’re often quite long. It seems paradoxical to use ever more words to try to explain something that is ultimately beyond words, but some interesting insights emerge from the sutras. If, in the end, everything is emptiness, then there is really no difference between things for which we make human distinctions. This is the doctrine of nonduality, which is illustrated in a story from the famous Vimalakirti Sutra (c. 100 C.E.).
 - Vimalakirti was a layperson who taught the dharma so authoritatively that the Buddha sent some of his disciples to talk with him. Through a series of dialogues, we see that Vimalakirti’s understanding surpasses theirs and, indeed, is equaled only by that of the Buddha himself. These debates were witnessed by disciples, bodhisattvas, gods, and goddesses.

- At one point, a goddess showers heavenly flowers on all the spectators. Those that hit the bodhisattvas bounce off and fall to the floor, but they stick to the bodies of the Theravada monks. The goddess explains that the disciples still make distinctions between worldly and unworldly things, but because the bodhisattvas have gone beyond those conceptual categories, they are indifferent to the flowers and, thus, nothing sticks to them. Similarly, there is ultimately no difference between life and death, enlightened and unenlightened beings, even samsara (reincarnation) and nirvana (extinction).
- Later on in the sutra, Vimalakirti challenges 32 bodhisattvas to explain nonduality, and they all take a turn, each trying to best the one before. Finally, Vimalakirti offers his contribution, which is to say nothing, and Manjusri, a bodhisattva famous for his transcendent wisdom, says, “Excellent! This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas” (Thurman, 77).

Reactions: Lotus Sutra

- There were several reactions to the new Mahayana Buddhist texts. The first was puzzlement: Where did these new scriptures come from? And how can they possibly be the words of the Buddha, given that they have appeared 500 years after his death?
 - Mahayana monks offered various explanations. These were the higher teachings of the Buddha, they said, which he entrusted only to his most advanced disciples, and they had been hidden away until the present age.
 - Another explanation was that the new scriptures had been heard and preserved by celestial bodhisattvas (rather than Ananda), who were now revealing them.
- Not everyone found these explanations convincing, but over time, the Mahayana sutras became more accepted, along with the distinctive doctrines of infinite compassion, bodhisattvas, multiple buddhas in multiple worlds, the buddha nature that is within each

of us, the emptiness of all phenomena, and the three bodies of the Buddha: a transformation body (physical, historical Siddhartha Gautama), an enjoyment body (the heavenly buddha that oversees pure lands and whom believers see in visions), and a dharma body (the ultimate nature of reality, omnipresent truth body, with no limits or boundaries).

- Some sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra, asserted that Siddhartha Gautama had become a buddha eons ago, but he came to earth and pretended to be disillusioned with his princely life, gave it up, pretended to gain enlightenment, and then only seemed to die and enter nirvana—all for the benefits of others. This sort of theologizing answers some questions, but it created other problems.
- As the Mahayana sutras multiplied, so did the contradictions in their teachings. How could a Buddhist make sense of it all? The



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The Lotus Sutra asserts Siddhartha Gautama was already a buddha when he came to earth and only pretended to gain enlightenment and reach nirvana for the benefit of others.

Lotus Sutra provided an answer in the famous parable of the burning house.

- Once there was a wealthy man who had many young sons, and they all lived in a large house with only one exit. One day, the house caught fire. The man managed to get his sons out by promising that he had presents for them outside the gate.
- A disciple of the Buddha explained that the man had not exactly lied to his sons because he gave each of them something much better than they could have imagined. This was not a case of telling falsehoods as much as using “expedient devices.” Out of compassion, the man tailored his message to each son so that he could save them all.
- The Buddha himself goes on to explain that this life is like a burning house, and he came into the world to save people from “the fires of birth, old age, sickness and death, care, suffering, stupidity, misunderstanding, and the three poisons.” But most people are so caught up in their day-to-day concerns and activities that they have no idea what danger they’re in.
- Thus, he offers them three vehicles: that of the *arhat*, or disciple (basically, Theravada Buddhism); that of the solitary Buddha; and that of the bodhisattva (Mahayana). Each message appeals to different types of people, but in the end, they all receive the same wondrous gift of enlightenment.
- The moral of the tale is that the Buddha may have told some disciples one thing and other disciples another—his words may seem contradictory—but his teachings are all nevertheless part of one great truth, the truth of Mahayana Buddhism, the One Vehicle.

More Reactions: Diamond and Heart Sutras

- Even if the theological contradictions could be resolved, there remained the practical problem of a canon that includes hundreds of books, some of them quite long. Even monks and nuns couldn’t

master them all, and for Mahayana Buddhism, with its new emphasis on the spiritual progress of laypersons, the problem was even more acute.

- One response was to pick out a few sutras that were considered particularly insightful or advanced and focus on them as a sort of canon within the canon. Different schools of Buddhism championed different texts, but in East Asia, the Lotus Sutra became the most popular and widely read of the sacred texts of Buddhism.
 - The Lotus Sutra was originally compiled in the 1st century C.E. It was first translated from Sanskrit into Chinese in the 3rd century, then again much more accurately in the early 5th century, after which it became very popular, especially in Japan.
 - In China, it was adopted as the key scripture of the Tiantai school of Buddhism, which then spread to Japan as the Tendai school. In Japan, it was adopted by the imperial family and cultural elites, and its message was spread through art, music, sermons, ritual performances, protective charms, and Noh drama.
 - Eventually a 13th-century Japanese monk named Nichiren made the Lotus Sutra the center of his new form of Buddhism and taught his followers to look to it for salvation. The practices of Nichiren are still followed today in a Japanese lay Buddhist movement called Soka-gakkai.
- Another tactic, rather than focusing on a single text, was to try to distill the expanding versions of the perfection of wisdom sutras into something much shorter and more portable. Thus, for example, rather than the Perfection of Wisdom in 18,000 Lines, we find the Diamond Sutra, which is about the size of a pamphlet.
 - This sutra consists of a dialogue between the Buddha and a disciple, in which the Buddha explains repeatedly that the ordinary ways of thinking about Buddhism are undercut by the realization that all things are emptiness.

- The Heart Sutra goes even further, reducing the Buddha's esoteric wisdom to a single page, which is recited daily by monks and lay Buddhists throughout East Asia.
- Mahayana sutras are often associated with what scholars term “the cult of the book.” These texts were regarded as sacred objects, almost apart from their actual contents. They were seen as physical manifestations of the Buddha, and copying, reciting, reading, hearing, explaining, or even holding them were regarded as actions that brought great merit. The paradox here is worth noting: Mahayana scriptures are objects of veneration and care, but they have no ultimate value—the goal is to move beyond them.

Suggested Reading

Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra of the Perfect Wisdom*.

Lopez, *The Story of Buddhism*.

Strong, ed. and trans., *The Experience of Buddhism*.

Teiser and Stone, eds., *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*.

Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*.

Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*.

Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra*.

Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Buddhist canon of scripture expand dramatically some 400 years after the death of the Buddha?
2. How did Buddhists deal with a collection of sacred texts so large that it was difficult to read, let alone master, in a single lifetime?

Pure Land Buddhism and Zen

Lecture 17

In 11th-century Japan, Buddhist monks had calculated that the year 1052 marked the beginning of a period when Buddhism would gradually decline. In response, people buried copies of sutras to preserve them for future generations. Among these sutras were the Lotus Sutra and the three Pure Land Sutras: the Larger Pure Land Sutra (or Sutra of Immeasurable Life), the Smaller Pure Land Sutra (or Amida Sutra), and the Sutra of Meditation on Amida Buddha. The message of these texts is that in a degenerate age, it's impossible to gain enlightenment through one's own efforts; thus, our only recourse is to rely on the grace of Amida Buddha (known as Amitabha in China), which means "infinite light."

Pure Land Sutras

- Mahayana Buddhism introduced the idea of multiple buddhas and bodhisattvas in other parts of the universe.
 - Some of these beings had created buddha-fields, or Pure Lands, and people of ordinary moral capacities or even grievous sinners could ask to be reborn in one of these celestial realms. The most famous of these was the Western Paradise of Amida, or the Land of Bliss.
 - This paradise is like heaven but not in the Christian sense because it doesn't last forever. Rather, it's a place where individuals can enjoy a pleasant environment in which to learn the dharma and gain enlightenment at their own pace; eventually, they will go directly from the Pure Land into nirvana.
- The Pure Land Sutras offer detailed accounts of the wonders of this region: filled with streams, flowers, fruits, bejeweled trees, parks, pools, and palaces. The air is filled with music and delightful fragrances, and everywhere, one hears the truths about

the six perfections, nonexistence, no-self, friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and so forth.

- The Pure Land Sutras are not particularly long texts, but there's enough detail that one can almost see the Pure Land—which is partly the point: These texts can be used as aids to meditation and visualization.
- But the most prominent practice associated with Pure Land Buddhism is the *nembutsu*, that is, the invocation of Amida's name 10 times to achieve salvation.
- The Larger and Smaller Pure Land Sutras originated in India around 200 C.E., while the Meditation Sutra seems to have been written in Central Asia or China, but all these sutras gained their greatest popularity in medieval Japan during an era of political and spiritual crisis.
 - A 12th-century Buddhist monk named Honen founded the Pure Land School when he encouraged his followers to disregard such traditional Buddhist practices as meditating, performing good works, and chanting scriptures and simply to focus on reciting the *nembutsu*.
 - A generation later, Honen's disciple Shinran argued that true faith wouldn't feel the need for ceaseless repetitions; calling on Amida even once, in full sincerity, would be enough. Shinran gave up monasticism, married, and founded the True Pure Land school, perhaps the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in Japan today.

Zen Origins and Scriptures

- With so many scriptures in the Mahayana tradition advocating so many seemingly contradictory positions, some Buddhists looked for a more direct path to enlightenment. Zen focused on meditation under the personal guidance of someone who was already enlightened.

- The word *Zen* is a Japanese form of the Chinese *chan*, which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, referring to a mind absorbed in meditation. The school had its origins in China, where Mahayana Buddhism was influenced by Daoism, especially its idea of wordless teaching. Legends trace its beginning to the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who came from the west to China in the early 5th century. He became known as the first patriarch.
- A famous definition of Zen is sometimes attributed to Bodhidharma, though it actually dates from several centuries later: “A special transmission outside the scriptures; / Without depending on words and letters; / Pointing directly to the human mind; / Seeing the innate nature, one becomes a Buddha.”
- It is somewhat ironic that a religious tradition that is primarily inward looking and generally disregards scripture developed a body of authoritative sacred texts—scriptures—that eventually became part of the Chinese Buddhist canon.
 - The most famous of these texts is the Platform Sutra of the sixth patriarch, written about 780. This text is quite unusual because, unlike most sutras, it is not presented as the words of the historical Buddha or a bodhisattva. The Platform Sutra is a sermon given by the 7th-century Zen patriarch Huinég.
 - In this sermon, Huinég recounts that he was once an illiterate gatherer of firewood who happened to hear the Diamond Sutra being recited, and his mind was awakened. He traveled to a monastery, where he worked for eight months as help in the kitchen. When the fifth patriarch was about to die, he asked his disciples to write poems that would indicate the level of their spiritual progress. Everyone hesitated until finally, the head monk, Shenxiu, wrote a poem anonymously on a wall in the middle of the night.
 - Huinég realized that Shenxiu’s poem, which offers a purification model of enlightenment, was insightful but didn’t completely capture the whole truth. Huinég composed

his own poem, suggesting that enlightenment comes from recognizing reality by seeing beyond the ordinary distinctions we make in life.

- When the fifth patriarch saw Huinóng's poem, he recognized its profound understanding, and summoning Huinóng secretly, he explained the Diamond Sutra to him, gave him the robe of transmission and appointed him as his successor (the sixth patriarch), and then sent him away so as not to upset the monks.
- The Platform Sutra was written by later followers of Huinóng to defend his claims to leadership over those of Shenxiu. It is often regarded as promoting the idea of sudden enlightenment over gradual enlightenment, though some scholars have suggested that the Platform Sutra actually appears to transcend those theological distinctions and find room for both constant practice and liberating insight.

Zen Buddhism in Japan

- Zen became the dominant form of Buddhism in China in the 12th century, a time when Buddhist monks were traveling from Japan to China seeking the full dharma. Eventually, Zen declined in China with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, but it came into its own in Japan. Not only was its meditational and ethical discipline attractive to samurai, but its aesthetic sense became fundamental in Japanese art, music, drama, tea drinking, and even archery and swordsmanship.
- Two monks were chiefly responsible for bringing Zen to Japan: Eisai (late 12th century), who advocated the Rinzai school of sudden enlightenment, and Dogen (13th century), founder of the Soto school of gradual enlightenment. Both Zen traditions emphasized experiential understanding through meditation and downplayed scripture study, discursive thought, and philosophical analysis. Both schools also stressed the importance of the master-disciple relationship.

- Monks would practice daily meditation and then have private interviews with their Zen teachers, who would evaluate and guide their practice.

- These interviews often included rather cryptic exchanges, and Rinzai masters in particular were known for teaching through silence, shouting, or unexpected, even bizarre actions.



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The aesthetic sense of Zen Buddhism has influenced many aspects of life in Japan, including gardening, art, and even swordsmanship.

- Unlike the Soto school of gradual enlightenment, where students were encouraged to sit with an empty, calm mind, Rinzai teachers encouraged their disciples to meditate on koans—paradoxical sayings or narratives that could jolt one from ordinary modes of thinking.
- Inevitably, stories of how famous Zen masters became enlightened and taught others were collected and canonized, along with classic examples of koans. Two of the most famous compilations are the *Blue Cliff Record* (12th century) and the *Gateless Barrier* (13th century).
- Despite its prominence in Japanese culture, Zen Buddhism is not uniquely Japanese; it's not the only type of Buddhism in Japan; it's not a major division of Buddhism; and it doesn't entirely reject doctrine or scriptures. Zen Buddhists believe that sacred

texts are inadequate rather than worthless; a direct mind-to-mind transmission is needed for enlightenment.

Fǎxiǎn's Pilgrimage

- Whether or not you believe that enlightenment or nirvana is accessible through meditation, calling upon Amida, or reciting the Diamond Sutra, clearly, the vast Buddhist canon asks and answers some of life's most profound questions: Is there a reality beyond ordinary existence? How does the mind shape and, perhaps, limit our perceptions of reality? What is the right balance between study and experience in learning something new? And, for our purposes, how important are sacred texts for gaining insight or wisdom?
- On the one hand, we have the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, much beloved by Zen Buddhists, which suggests that the scriptures can be a distraction. On the other hand, we have the example of such figures as Fǎxiǎn, a Chinese monk who set out on a pilgrimage to India in 399 in search of authoritative Vinaya texts.
 - For at least two centuries, trade goods, along with the new religion of Buddhism, had been coming to China from unknown lands in the west. But the transmission of the religion was somewhat fragmentary. Although the Chinese had a number of Buddhist scriptures, the translations weren't good and the doctrines seemed contradictory.
 - In response to this situation, Fǎxiǎn set off on foot, following the Silk Road through deserts and over mountains, crossing rivers, and at one point climbing down 700 ladders attached to cliffs. Fǎxiǎn traveled through 30 different kingdoms in present-day China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, visiting holy sites and studying with various teachers. Then he sailed home on ships that stopped at Sri Lanka and Indonesia, with his precious cargo of Buddhist relics, images, and scriptures.
 - At one point, a fierce storm arose, and Fǎxiǎn's ship sprang a leak. The terrified merchants on the ship threw their goods and merchandise overboard to lighten the load. Fǎxiǎn tossed

his cup and wash basin into the sea, but he refused to part with anything else, praying fervently to the bodhisattva Guanyin to save the ship.

- After 13 days, the voyagers finally reached a small island, and everyone survived. Eventually, Fǎxiǎn made it back to China. Altogether, his journey took him 14 years and covered more than 8,000 miles. He spent the rest of his life translating into Chinese the Sanskrit texts he had so laboriously acquired, and he wrote an account of his travels, which itself became part of the Chinese Buddhist canon.
- Fǎxiǎn's account of his visit to Vulture Peak, where the Buddha was thought to have taught the Lotus Sutra, is incredibly moving. Fǎxiǎn realizes that all that remains in his era are "traces of the Buddha's presence," including the scriptures that preserve his words. But to Fǎxiǎn, those sacred texts were worth a decade and a half of untold hardships and dangers, followed by a lifetime of meticulous study.

Suggested Reading

Chang, Chung-Yuan, trans., *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*.

Conze, et al., trans., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages*.

Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

Inagaki and Steward, trans., *The Three Pure Land Sutras*.

Moerman, "The Death of the Dharma."

Olson, ed., *Original Buddhist Sources*.

Sekida, trans. and commentator, and Grimstone, ed., *Two Zen Classics*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways was Buddhism transformed when it became popular in Japan?
2. Why might a religion that explicitly rejects reliance on sacred texts, such as Zen Buddhism, eventually produce texts that are themselves revered?

Tibetan Vajrayana

Lecture 18

Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana, is an esoteric tradition that includes practices that may at first seem strange, but to focus on those elements ignores the remarkable philosophical and scholarly accomplishments that are also part of this branch of the religion. Although Tibetan Buddhism receives a great deal of attention in the West, especially since the annexation of Tibet by China and the flight of the Dalai Lama and many of his followers to India in 1959, adherents of Vajrayana number only about 20 million out of 400 million Buddhists around the world. Numerically, Tibetan Buddhism is not terribly significant, but in terms of scholarship, it's enormously important.

Tibetan Vajrayana and Its Canon

- Vajrayana, which means the “Thunderbolt” or “Diamond Vehicle,” is the third major Buddhist tradition, after Theravada and Mahayana. The term *Vajra* refers to the legendary thunderbolt weapon of the Hindu god Indra, which was thought to be indestructible, and to a small scepter-like object used in rituals.
- Vajrayana began in India in the 6th or 7th centuries, when Tantric techniques were added to Mahayana philosophy. Tantrism refers to physical or mental actions that can facilitate or accelerate the journey to enlightenment. Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism, is today mostly found in Tibet, but there is also an important offshoot in Japan known as Shingon (“True Word”).
- As you may recall, the Tibetan canon is one of the three major collections of Buddhist sacred texts, the others being the Pali canon of Theravada in 48 volumes and the Chinese canon of 100 volumes, which is also used in Japan and Korea. The Tibetan canon, however, weighs in at 322 volumes and includes many translations of Sanskrit texts that have otherwise been lost.

- Buddhism first came to Tibet at the time of Songtsen Gampo, an early-7th-century king who had married two Buddhist princesses, one from Nepal and the other from China. Under his direction, a Tibetan script was developed, based on Sanskrit, so that translations could begin. Buddhism wasn't particularly influential, however, until the late 8th century, when another king invited an Indian monk to establish a monastery.
 - Buddhists soon faced intense hostility from the native Tibetan religion of Bon. The king invited the Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava to duel with demons and Bon priests through spectacular feats of magic.
 - This was the legendary "first dissemination" of Buddhism into Tibet, which is associated with the Nyingma sect, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism.
 - Tradition reports that about this time (c. 792), the king ordered a public debate between Chinese and Indian Buddhists. The Indians won, but another period of persecution followed not long after.
- In the 10th century, more monks came from India, bringing a "second dissemination" of Buddhism into Tibet, which picked up momentum with the arrival of Atisha in 1042. Atisha, an accomplished scholar, valued the discipline and insights of early forms of Buddhism, such as Theravada, along with Mahayana philosophy and its emphasis on the bodhisattva path and the latest Tantric techniques. He founded the Kadam school of Tibetan Buddhism, which was later followed by the Kagyu school and the Sakya school.
- Buddhist monks fleeing the Muslim conquest of India carried new scriptures to Tibet, where they were translated and eventually canonized. The Tibetan canon consists of two parts. The first is the Kangyur—the translation of the word of the Buddha—consisting of more than 600 texts in 98 volumes. The second, much longer part is the Tengyur—translations of treatises—which consists of



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The great 14th-century Tibetan scholar and reformer Tsong Khapa wrote a multivolume elaboration of Atisha's "Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment."

more than 3,600 texts in 224 volumes. There is also a large body of commentaries written by Tibetans that are not included in the canon.

Atisha's "Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment"

- One influential, relatively accessible example of a Buddhist text written for Tibetans is Atisha's "Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment," a masterpiece of synthesis that combines the ethics of the Theravada Vinaya, the philosophy of Mahayana perfections of wisdom, and the Tantric ritual of Vajrayana. This scripture, with a commentary written by Atisha himself, was included in the Tengyur section of the Tibetan canon.
- Atisha addresses his words to those who seek enlightenment to benefit all beings, not just to end their personal suffering (the bodhisattva path). Ideally, one should take the vow to become a bodhisattva from a teacher, and Atisha stresses that the best path forward is that of a monk who purifies body, speech, and mind

through strict morality and discipline (Vinaya). By practicing meditation, calm abiding and higher perceptions will arise.

- Atisha further explains the necessary combination of skillful means and wisdom (perfection of wisdom) and ends by acknowledging the efficacy of mantras, actions, and performances under the direction of a teacher or guru (Tantrism).
- But Atisha warns that even though monks can study the antras and make offerings, they are not allowed to receive secret or wisdom initiations. To do so would result in breaking their vows, defeat, and bad rebirths.

Tantrism

- Tantrism is a type of Buddhism that arose in India in the 6th or 7th centuries and combined Mahayana doctrines with secret rituals or practices that offered shortcuts to enlightenment. The bodhisattva path, with its six perfections, could take many lifetimes to complete. One of the six perfections was perfect meditation, which was generally understood to mean stilling the mind and body. Tantric teachers, by contrast, urged students to put the body and mind to work through mudras (ritual postures or gestures), mantras (sacred sounds or phrases), mandalas (sacred symbolic diagrams), and visualizations of multiple gods and goddesses.
- Tantrism is active rather than quiescent or passive. It uses physical and mental functions to transcend body and mind, like using fire to fight fire or desire to overcome desire.
 - Mahayana perfection of wisdom texts teach that in the end, there is no difference between samsara and nirvana, that attachment and aversion are both traps, that anything and everything can be a manifestation of the Buddha's dharma-body (ultimate reality).
 - Tantrism adds actions to those insights. Thus, we can see how using a bowl fashioned from a human skull or blowing a horn

made from a human bone might demonstrate that one has stepped beyond ordinary conceptions.

- Tantrism is also known for rituals that involve drinking wine or eating meat in a cemetery at night or even engaging in sexual behavior without desire, while visualizing one's partner as a deity. It's easy to imagine how such practices might be abused, which is why it is crucial that they are undertaken under the direction of a qualified guru (Tibetan: *lama*).
 - Another reason that expert guidance is needed is that Tantric texts are often written in cryptic language that is unintelligible to outsiders; further, it's often unclear whether the rituals described are meant to be visualized in meditation or physically performed.
 - Many Tantric practices require a *yi-dam*, that is, a holy being chosen for a particular worshipper, appropriate to his or her nature. These deities may be male or female, wrathful or peaceful.
- It is common to categorize tantras into four stages: (1) action tantras, where adherents visualize themselves as servants of meditational deities and offer their devotions; (2) performance tantras, in which adherents see themselves as equal to a deity and perceive their own potential as enlightened bodhisattvas; (3) yoga tantras, or the gradual identification with deities to gain their perfections and wisdom; and (4) supreme yoga, that is, the transformation into a bodhisattva by learning to control energy channels, centers, winds, and drops within one's subtle body.
 - In supreme yoga, one experiences the bliss of the union of self and other, of wisdom and compassion (skillful means), which may be visualized as the sexual union of male and female.
 - Some forms of supreme yoga might involve ritualized sexual intercourse, with spouses in the case of lay Buddhists or Nyingmapa *lamas*, who are permitted to marry. Monks in other

sects of Tibetan Buddhism, who have taken vows of celibacy, are allowed only to visualize such actions.

The Hevajra Tantra and Tibetan Book of the Dead

- About one-fifth of the Kangyur—the first part of the Tibetan canon—consists of Tantric texts, including a profusion of mantras, mudras, and mandalas that can put one in tune with a *yi-dam* and provide a focus for meditation and visualization.
 - The Hevajra Tantra, influential in the Sakya school, is one example of these texts. Hevajra is a popular chosen deity (*yi-dam*) of the wrathful variety and is often depicted with multiple arms holding weapons and skull bowls, embracing a female consort, and standing on a lotus and a corpse.
 - The tantra offers detailed instructions for multiple rituals and visualizations, but it's not really meant to be understood by outsiders; understanding requires a qualified guru. For us, it raises an interesting question that applies to many religions: Is the body a hindrance or a help to spiritual progress and salvation—however one might define it?
- The most famous text of Vajrayana Buddhism is the Tibetan Book of the Dead, although it is much better known in the West than in Tibet. The story of this text starts with theosophy, a sort of 19th-century New Age religion that taught the oneness of all beings, reincarnation, and karma, combined with an interest in mystical insight, esoteric teachings, and occult experiences.
 - In 1919, Walter Evans-Wentz, a theosophist, traveled to north India and bought an old Tibetan manuscript from a monk. Not knowing Tibetan himself, he found a translator and together, they produced what we know today as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, first published in 1927. It's important to note, however, that Evans-Wentz's volume was more a product of American spiritualism than Tibetan culture.
 - The manuscript Evans-Wentz came across was part of a larger cycle of texts known as Bardo Thodol ("Liberation in the

Intermediate State through Hearing”). The work belongs to a rather unique genre called *terma*, or “treasure texts.” These are documents that were thought to have been written by Padmasambhava in the 8th century and then hidden so that they could survive centuries of persecution and be rediscovered in later generations.

- The text, which was read in the presence of someone who was dying, is more about rebirth than death. It gives a detailed description of what the dying person is about to experience and how he or she should respond. It speaks of three intermediate stages in the 49 days between death and rebirth, leading to either liberation from future rebirths or rebirth as a god, a demigod, a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, or a hell-being.

Suggested Reading

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———, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*.

Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*.

Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*.

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Rinchen (author) and Sonam (trans.), *Atisha’s Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.

Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*.

Questions to Consider

1. What makes Tibetan Buddhism distinctive, and what is Tantrism?
2. Why is the Tibetan Book of the Dead better known in America than in Tibet?

Related Traditions—Jain Scriptures

Lecture 19

Jainism and Buddhism are sister religions—much like Judaism and Christianity. The two Indian traditions share many foundational concepts and come out of the same social environment. And like Judaism and Christianity, they followed different paths, with one becoming a successful missionary religion, and the other, arguably the more demanding of the two, maintaining a vibrant religious and intellectual presence yet remaining relatively small. Today there are some 500 million Buddhists in the world, and only about 4 million Jains. Despite the size differential, Jainism is an ancient religious tradition that is well worth studying; in this lecture, we'll see how Jainism upends some of our common assumptions about scripture.

Jainism and Buddhism

- It's not exactly clear when Buddha and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, lived. Traditional dates are in the 6th century B.C.E., though scholars now lean more toward the 5th century. Either way, Buddha and Mahavira seem to have been contemporaries or near-contemporaries.
- Both were raised as princes in the Kshatriya (warrior) caste in northern India. Both left home at the age of 30 to find spiritual fulfillment through asceticism and meditation. After six years, the Buddha dropped his severe fasting and then became enlightened under a bodhi tree. In contrast, Mahavira never gave up his ascetic practices, and after 12 years, he achieved his own sort of enlightenment and became a Jina, or "Conqueror."
- Jains are those who follow the Jinas. Mahavira is not regarded as the founder of the religion; rather, he is the last of a series of 24 Tirthankaras in this world era. *Tirthankara* means "maker of a ford"—someone who gains liberation and can teach others the way across the oceans of suffering and samsara. Actually, even Mahavira is a title—"Great Hero"; his name was Vardhamana.

- For the next three or four decades after enlightenment, both Buddha and Mahavira taught the truths they had discovered. They gained lay followers and ordained monks and nuns, who left behind all worldly connections and devoted themselves exclusively to salvation. Their teachings were passed down orally for several centuries before they were transcribed in written form.

Basic Principles of Jainism

- As you may recall, Hindus believed that humans, animals, and gods all had a soul, or *atman*, while the Buddha proclaimed that nothing had a soul. Mahavira taught that everything has a soul—not just people and animals but plants, rocks, drops of water, gusts of wind, and flames of fire.
 - The world is divided into two types of phenomena—*jiva* (living beings, or the life principle within things) and *ajiva* (insentient matter, time, and space).
 - There is no creator god or creation; *jiva* have been entangled with material elements from eternity, but even without a beginning, there can nevertheless be an end, and existence as a human being offers the best chance at this.
 - Once a *jiva* is freed from the corrupting influence of matter, it attains infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. But it remains distinct; it isn't subsumed into *brahman* (as in Hinduism), and it doesn't dissipate into nonexistence (Buddhism.)
- In all three religions, living a good life to attain a better rebirth is a good thing, but the ultimate goal is to escape from the cycle of rebirth altogether.
 - In Hinduism, this is done when one's *atman* merges with *brahman* (ultimate reality), through the ways of knowledge, works, or devotion. In Buddhism, liberation comes with the realization that there was never any self to begin with, and like Hinduism, it develops the notion of savior figures—*bodhisattvas*—who can assist in this process.

- In Jainism, however, liberation comes only through one's own efforts, by ridding oneself of karma, which is thought of as a subtle form of matter that sticks to *jiva* and weighs them down. Escaping karma can be done through ascetic renunciation, with the preeminent virtue being ahimsa, or nonviolence. Jains believe it is far better to suffer oneself than to cause suffering to other living beings.
- All Jains accept the five vows: no injuring other living beings, no lying or deceit, no taking what is not given, no sexual immorality, and no attachment. For ordinary Jains, this means living simple lives of kindness, integrity, and generosity. Sexual relations are restricted to marriage, and possessions are kept to a minimum. When Jains pray (or, more accurately, chant mantras), they show respect for those who have achieved liberation, but they are not allowed to ask for blessings or material benefits.
- The requirements for monks and nuns are much stricter, because they hope to attain moksha, or liberation, in this lifetime by ridding themselves of all karmic residues. They give up home, family, and nearly all possessions and eat only what is given to them. Jain monks and nuns are not allowed to use vehicles and must walk barefoot everywhere. Their lives are devoted to meditation, preaching, and scholarship, and the greatest spiritual achievement is to gradually stop eating or drinking anything and fast to death.
- There are several subsets of Jains, but the major division is between Shvetambara and Digambara Jains, which split sometime around the 4th or 5th centuries C.E. The main differences are that Digambara ("Sky-clad") monks wear nothing whatsoever, while Shvetambara ("White-clad") monks and nuns wear plain white robes.

Jain Scriptures

- In most world religions, scripture is at the core of religious identity, but in Jainism, Shvetambaras and Digambaras for the most part reject each other's scriptures as forgeries. They are clearly in the

same religious tradition, and their beliefs are quite similar, but there are almost no shared textual resources.

- Shvetambaras and Digambaras both agree that Mahavira taught 14 texts called Purvas, which were identical to those taught by all the preceding Tirthankaras. These communicated the eternal truths of omniscient beings. Mahavira's first followers came from the Brahman caste, and those disciples memorized the Purvas, but ultimately, all the Purvas were lost, with only fragments or paraphrases remaining.
- Over several centuries, the Shvetambaras developed replacement scriptures that captured some of the traditions associated with Mahavira and were written in the Ardhamagadhi language—a more vernacular dialect than Sanskrit, though it became a literary, scriptural language.
 - Most Shvetambaras accept 45 texts as authoritative, most of which go by the name of sutras: 12 Angas (“limbs”), dealing with basic doctrines, moral prescriptions for monks and laypersons, cosmology, and narratives of Mahavira, Jina, and pious believers; 12 Upangas (“subordinate limbs”), treating ontological, cosmological, and epistemological matters; 6 Cheda-sutras (“separate”), having to do with disciplinary issues; 4 Mula-sutras (“basic”) that were typically studied by new monks and nuns, 10 miscellaneous texts on astrology and ascetic ritual; and 2 appendices that offer summaries and explanations.
 - This Shvetambara canon was written down on palm-leaf manuscripts about the 5th century C.E. after a series of councils, yet even today, there is not complete agreement on exactly which texts belong in the collection of 45, and some Shvetambara subjects reject as many as 13 of them.
- Digambara Jains also believe that the 14 original Purvas were lost, but they reject all the Shvetambara scriptures. Instead, they view as authoritative two doctrinal synopses written by monks in the 2nd century C.E.: the Scripture of Six Parts and the Treatise on

the Passions. The Digambara scriptures are written in a different vernacular language, called Jain Sauraseni.

- In both traditions, laypersons don't really read or study the scriptures; instead, they learn some of their contents through sermons or short summaries written by monks. Nevertheless, the Jains have a rich tradition of scholarship, commentaries, philosophy, and literature.

Examples of Jain Texts

- Hermann Jacobi, a German scholar, translated four Jain texts for Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*: the *Acaranga Sutra*, the *Uttaradhyayana*, the *Kritanga Sutra*, and the *Kalpa Sutra*.
- Jacobi began with the first of the 12 *Angas*, the *Acaranga Sutra*, which is often regarded as the oldest item in the Jain scriptures and includes rules for monks and nuns regarding food, clothing, and lodging, as well as the earliest account of Mahavira's life. This *sutra* also includes the Five Great Vows undertaken by all Jains.
- The *Uttaradhyayana*, one of the four *Mula-sutras*, is more specific about what the vows mean for renunciants. For instance: "If a layperson abuses a monk he should not grow angry against him; because he would be like a child, a monk should not grow angry."
- Jacobi also translated the second *Anga*, the *Kritanga Sutra*, which offers an introduction to Jain teachings, as well as a critical examination of competing doctrines at the time of Mahavira. According to the *Kritanga Sutra*, "These three classes of living beings have been declared by the Jinās: (1) earth, water, fire, wind; (2) grass, trees, and plants; and (3) the moving beings, both the egg-bearing and those that bear live offspring, those generated from dirt and those generated in fluids. Know and understand that they all desire happiness."
- And finally, Jacobi translated the *Kalpa Sutra*, which retells the story of Mahavira's life with more legendary details than what is found

in the Acaranga Sutra, along with narratives from the biographies of a few other Tirthankaras. This text is from one of the Cheda-sutras, but it gained its prominence from the fact that it is read aloud every year during the eight-day Paryushana (rainy season festival)—the most important event in the Shvetambara ritual calendar, when Jains fast, confess their sins, and ask forgiveness.

- The Digambaras also celebrate Paryushana, but instead of the Kalpa Sutra, they recite the Tattvartha Sutra (“That Which Is”), the first systematic exposition of Jain doctrines written in Sanskrit, which was composed by the 2nd-century monk Umasvati. In 250 terse aphorisms, it covers Jain epistemology, metaphysics, cosmology, and ethics.
 - Although it is not exactly scriptural, the Tattvartha Sutra is nevertheless the only Jain text that is held in high respect by both Shvetambaras and Digambaras.
 - The form is similar to that of Hindu sutras, and it quickly moves through lists of the seven categories of truth, five varieties of knowledge, eight types of karma, different types of beings, various spatial realms, enumerations of vows and moral precepts, karmic obstacles, and the process of liberation.
- What’s striking about Jainism is not just the desire to escape perpetual suffering but the desire to avoid any entanglement in causing or even benefiting from the use and exploitation of other living creatures, both animate and inanimate. The Uttaradhyayana in particular offers a powerful, even startling vision of empathy and compassion.

Suggested Reading

Dundas, *The Jains*.

Jacobi, trans., *Jaina Sutras*.

Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*.

Tatia, trans., *Tattvartha Sutra*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean for a religion when the sacred texts associated with a founding figure have all been lost?
2. How is it that the two major branches of Jainism have virtually no scriptures in common?
3. How do Jain sacred texts emphasize the concept of ahimsa, or nonviolence?

Five Confucian Classics

Lecture 20

In the last lecture, we saw that Jainism seems to undermine some common assumptions; it's clearly a religion, but unlike most of the other traditions we will encounter in this course, Jain identity is not primarily based on an established, widely accepted set of sacred texts. In this lecture, we are faced with nearly the opposite situation; Confucianism has a well-defined canon (in fact, two of them: the Five Classics and the Four Books), but it is often thought of as more of a philosophy than a religion. In this lecture, we'll explore possible explanations for this distinction and look in detail at four of the Five Classics.

Defining Confucianism

- Confucianism is a system of thought that originated in ancient China with Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). The Chinese call this system of thought *rujia* (“the school of scholars”) or *rujiao* (“teachings of the scholars”). Confucius was the inheritor and transmitter of an earlier cultural heritage, much of which was contained in the Five Classics.
 - When we think about religion in the West, we often have in mind social groups that share in a broad family of characteristics, such as belief in a god or gods, rituals, prayer, a moral code, and so on. Not every religion has all these features, yet we tend to think that we can fairly easily distinguish religion from, say, philosophy.
 - Confucianism contains traces of most of the common elements of religion, but the emphases are different than we might expect.
 - For example, Confucianism has a concept of an impersonal moral force called Heaven that is not exactly a god yet sometimes rewards and punishes human behavior. At the same time, the basic religion in China from its earliest period has been ancestor worship. The ceremonies of ancestor worship

were incorporated into Confucian living, though they were not elaborated upon theologically.

- Confucianism offers a strong moral code, a vision for living in harmony with the universe, and rituals for dealing with unseen beings, but many of its tenets seem rather practical and this-worldly, with an emphasis on family and politics. For these reasons, it has been viewed as both a philosophy and a religion.

Religion or Philosophy?

- In the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries to China admired Confucianism and treated it as a philosophy or an ethical system that was compatible with Christianity. Thus, Chinese Christians could continue to study the Confucian classics and participate in Confucian rituals.



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Confucianism encompasses many of the elements of religion, including temples where offerings are made to the sage himself.

- The Jesuits made considerable progress and even gained positions in the imperial court, but Dominicans and Franciscans insisted that the rites honoring Confucius and ancient ancestors were religious, and Chinese converts had to choose between Christianity and Confucianism.
- The Rites Controversy went on for nearly a century, but the result was that Chinese Catholics were forbidden to participate in Confucian rites, which almost brought Catholic missionary work in China to an end.
- In the 19th century, at a time when China was much weaker compared to European societies, Protestant missionaries were less accommodating, though Western scholars were beginning to develop the idea of world religions and view Confucianism within that category, as something worthy of respect.
 - One key individual—both a missionary and a scholar—was James Legge. A Scotsman who served as the head of a Christian college in Hong Kong for nearly 30 years, Legge began translating and publishing the Confucian Classics while in China, and then, in 1876, he was appointed as the first chair of Chinese Language and Literature at Oxford. Four years later, Legge published *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described*, which put the teachings of Confucius firmly within the religion camp.
 - During his 20 years at Oxford, Legge continued to revise and enlarge the scope of his translations. At Oxford, he met Max Müller, and together, they published some of Legge's translations of Confucian and Daoist classics as part of the Sacred Books of the East. This, as much as anything, contributed to the notion that Confucianism could be considered on an equal footing with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.
- In the 20th century, Chinese scholars themselves started writing in English about Confucian texts, and they tended to treat them more as philosophy than religion. This was probably an attempt to

make the ideas more attractive to Westerners, but it also reflected attitudes in China, where successive governments did not count Confucianism as one of the five recognized religions.

- Eventually, Western scholars began to split the difference. One important study was titled *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, and textbooks often use such terms as “religious humanism” to describe the tradition.

The *Odes* and *Documents*

- One of the ways in which Confucianism is most like more familiar religions is in its use of sacred texts. From earliest times, Confucian scholars have been devoted to a collection of ancient writings that they regarded as profound, comprehensive, and uniquely authoritative. These were the Five Classics: the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, the *Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.
 - These texts all preceded Confucius, and even though later scholars regarded Confucius as the editor or commentator on these books, he probably did not have a direct role in their production. Indeed, the canonical forms of the texts were not established until several centuries after his death.
 - In the 1st century C.E., during the Han dynasty, the Five Classics became the basis for Chinese civil service exams and the foundation of state ideology.
- The *Odes*, also known as the *Book of Poetry*, consists of 305 poems dating from the 10th to the 7th centuries B.C.E. The poems are divided into four sections: *Airs of the States*, *Lesser Odes*, *Greater Odes*, and *Temple Hymns*.
 - The poems include a number of sacrificial and ceremonial hymns, often praising royal ancestors, but the most interesting poems for modern readers are probably those in the *Airs*. Many of these are folk songs about courtship, marriage, agriculture, military conscription, or oppressive officials.

- The tradition is that Confucius selected these songs from a much larger collection. Consequently, Chinese scholars have long looked for the hidden moral meaning that would have attracted Confucius's attention.
- The *Documents* is a collection of 58 speeches or edicts from the mythical sage kings Yao and Yu through the first three Chinese dynasties (roughly the 23rd to the 3rd centuries B.C.E.). The *Documents* treats matters of statecraft, including the notion of the Mandate of Heaven. The idea here is that Heaven, as an impersonal moral force, can grant its seal of approval to a virtuous ruler and, if necessary, later transfer that approval to a more worthy family, thereby authorizing rebellion and the foundation of a new dynasty.
- Both the *Odes* and the *Documents* were targeted by the first emperor of China in the famous burning of the books in 213 B.C.E. Later, copies of these texts were discovered, known as the New Text and the Old Text according to the style of writing used. In the mid-18th century, Chinese scholars proved that the Old Text chapters were 4th-century forgeries.

The *Rites* and *Annals*

- The third of the Five Classics is the *Rites*, which is a collection of three texts, the Ceremonials, the Zhou Rites, and the Records of Rites. These are compilations of traditions attributed to the early Zhou dynasty of proper government functions, ceremonies, and decorum, along with interpretations of the meaning of various rituals.
 - For example, in the Records of Rites, we find rules governing social visits, interviews with government authorities, and family interactions, along with rituals for coming of age, marriages, funerals, and so on. This information is presented through systematic descriptions, essays, dialogues, and historical narratives.
 - The *Rites* texts present an idealized version of social interactions during the time of the sage kings and were

probably compiled many centuries after the golden years of the early Zhou dynasty.

- The *Spring and Autumn Annals* consists of short notices of events that were recorded in Confucius's home state of Lu between 722 and 481 B.C.E. These texts are mostly notes about changes of rulers, marriages, deaths, diplomatic visits, and battles between the numerous feudal lords in the centuries immediately preceding Confucius.
 - What makes the *Spring and Autumn Annals* wonderful is its earliest commentary, compiled about 300 B.C.E. and attributed to Zuo Qiuming. This *Zuo Commentary* provides detailed historical narratives that explain the notices in the *Annals*.
 - The *Zuo Commentary* is a sort of encyclopedia of ancient China, with details about politics and warfare, family life, gender relations, ethics, ghosts, omens, and ancestral spirits.
 - The *Commentary* probably dates to the 3rd century B.C.E. and may have originally been an independent history, but because it covered basically the same time period and events as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, it was reorganized as a commentary and immortalized by its association with Confucius.

Classics versus Scripture

- The Five Classics is an eclectic mix, but all its genres can also be found in the Hebrew Bible. Why, then, do we generally refer to the sacred texts of ancient Israel as “scripture” and the sacred texts of Confucianism as “classics”?
 - First, even though the Confucian Classics often mention Heaven, spirits, sacrifices, divination, and so forth, they are not as directly focused on a god or gods as the Hebrew Bible.
 - Second, the texts of Confucianism don't claim to be revealed; they were always regarded as the writings of ancient sages.

- Third, as far back as the 2nd century B.C.E., the Confucian Classics were intimately connected with state orthodoxy, imperial sponsorship, government education, and the civil service exams—precisely the sorts of worldly connections that we in the West tend to treat as political rather than spiritual.
- Yet part of the problem also seems to be a simple matter of translation. The five primary texts of Confucianism began to be known as *jing* (“classics”) in the Han dynasty. The word *jing* refers to the vertical threads, or warp, on a weaving loom and, hence, carries the connotations of basic guidelines, rules, or norms. A *jing* is a text that is deemed authoritative and orthodox.
 - When Buddhist sutras were translated into Chinese, they were labeled *jing*. Indeed, the fact that Buddhism entered China in the 1st century C.E. with authoritative texts probably made it more acceptable to the Chinese, who were already used to the idea of a written canon.
 - The scriptures of other faiths were also categorized as *jing*, such as the Daoist Daodejing, the Bible, and the Qur’an.
 - The word *jing* is the same in Chinese, and whether we translate it as “classic” or “scripture” is mostly a matter of habit.

Suggested Reading

Legge, trans. *The Chinese Classics*.

———, trans. *The Li Ki*.

Littlejohn, *Confucianism*.

Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics*.

Watson, trans. *The Tso Chuan*.

Waley, trans. *The Book of Songs*.

Questions to Consider

1. Is Confucianism more of a religion or a philosophy? And how does that affect the way we read its primary texts?
2. What themes are shared by Confucian Classics in the different genres of poetry, history, and ritual?

Four Books of Neo-Confucianism

Lecture 21

We begin this lecture with the last of the Five Confucian Classics, the *Changes*, or *Yijing* (*I-Ching*), which the Chinese considered the oldest and holiest of the Classics and which is by far the best known in the West. We will then turn to the canonization of the Five Classics, along with several other texts, and the development of Neo-Confucianism. As we'll see, the influential Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi urged his students to concentrate their efforts on learning the Four Books: the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Constant Mean*. We will explore these texts and Zhu Xi's metaphysical theory of *li* ("principle") and *qi* ("vital energy").

The *Yijing*

- The *Yijing* is an ancient manual of divination. The user manipulates milfoil stalks or, much later, coins to indicate a particular hexagram to predict the future or find clues about how a dynamic situation might change. The core text consists of 64 graphs of six stacked horizontal lines—some broken and some unbroken—along with a title and a short statement for each. There is also a series of brief judgments on each of six lines of the 64 graphs, which are useful when specific lines are determined to be particularly powerful or unstable.
- The solid lines in a hexagram are thought of as yang, while the broken lines represent yin, in accordance with the ancient Chinese notion that the cosmos consists of two opposing forces that are manifest in all things.
- The Chinese have long ascribed the hexagrams, statements, and line texts to the founders of the Zhou dynasty, in the 11th century B.C.E., and in fact, the book seems to be a compilation of divination lore from several centuries before Confucius. Yet the *Changes* is more than just a divination manual.

- Eventually, there were 10 appendices, or “wings,” that were added to the core text. These were commentaries, traditionally ascribed to Confucius, that explored cosmic patterns of change and transformation and even suggested that the *Yijing* contained within its hexagrams all possible states of transition and, hence, was a textual model or microcosm of the universe.
- By learning to distinguish significant from trivial change, careful readers could prioritize their concerns and efforts and learn to live in harmony with the inevitable ebbs and flows of the cosmos.

Neo-Confucianism

- With the canonization of the Five Classics in the Han dynasty, there came a need to establish, preserve, and transmit authoritative versions of the texts. Unlike in Hinduism, where there were rigorous methods of memorization, or in Judaism, with the amazing scribal quality control of the Masoretes, in China, canonization came about by carving the classics into stone.
- In 172 C.E., the emperor ordered a complete set of stone classics for the imperial academy. Seven Classics (the standard five, plus the *Analects of Confucius* and the brief Classic of Filial Piety) were carved onto 46 steles, each a little over eight feet high and three feet wide. Students could take rubbings from the stone texts on paper.
- After the collapse of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century C.E., Confucianism, which had been closely associated with the imperial government, fell into decline, while Daoism and Buddhism became more prominent. In the Tang dynasty, with the reunification of China under centralized rule, Confucianism began to make a comeback, and the Five Classics were again carved into stone in 837, along with several supplemental classics. From the 12th century on, it became common to talk about the Thirteen Classics of Confucianism.

- But Confucianism in the Tang dynasty and the succeeding Song dynasty (10th–13th centuries) was not quite the same as that of the Han dynasty. Buddhism had influenced Chinese sensibilities, and the new Confucianism (Neo-Confucianism) was much more interested in the ultimate nature of reality and humanity. It was also aimed at pursuing a program of self-cultivation and inner spirituality, rather than gaining the historical knowledge necessary to pass exams and become a government official.
- The most influential figure in Neo-Confucianism was a scholar named Zhu Xi (1130–1200). He championed a metaphysical theory in which everything is a combination of *li* (“principle”) and *qi* (“vital energy,” which in its heavier forms is matter). There is a principle, then a sort of ideal blueprint for being a ruler, a mother, or even a mountain or river. Actual rulers or mountains are all different because of the particular *qi* of which they are made.
 - This theory is important for two reasons: (1) It offers an analysis of the nature of the cosmos that could compete with Buddhist philosophy, and (2) it provides an ethical program for living; one can purify one’s actions and emotions to bring them into harmony with the near-perfect principle that is within us all.
 - Human nature is inherently good, and it’s our job to recapture that innate goodness through study, self-discipline, and “quiet-sitting.” By so doing, one can follow the Way (the Dao) of Heaven.
- Zhu Xi claimed to have recovered the long-lost original meanings of Confucian texts, though rather than the Five Classics, he urged his students and followers to concentrate their efforts on the Four Books: the *Analec*s, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Constant Mean*.
 - Mastery of one or two of the Five Classics had long been a path to success in the civil service exams and government office, but Zhu Xi realized that the Four Books were shorter, easier to read, and more directly applicable to personal moral improvement and inner spirituality.

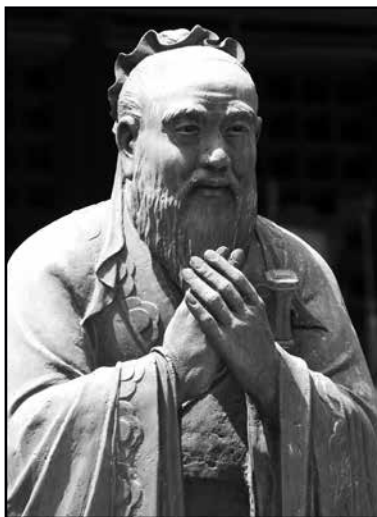
- His elevation of these texts was controversial during his lifetime, but in 1315, more than a century after Zhu Xi's death, the Mongols, who were trying to recruit Chinese to work as officials under them, restored the civil service exams and started testing students on their knowledge of the Four Books and Zhu Xi's commentaries.
- For the next 700 years, until the abolition of the state exams in 1905, the Four Books were the foundation of the official curriculum. The exams were the primary route to social mobility and respectability, and every exam candidate, along with nearly every schoolchild, had to memorize the Four Books. As the Five Classics declined in importance in late imperial China, the Four Books were widely studied in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In other words, Neo-Confucianism became an international movement.

The *Great Learning* and the *Analects*

- The *Great Learning* is the shortest and simplest of the Four Books. It begins with a few paragraphs attributed to Confucius, followed by 10 short passages of commentary credited to Zengzi, one of Confucius's first disciples. The *Great Learning* advocates a spiritual goal and an organized plan for one's studies; the crux is the "investigation of things," which Zhu Xi defined as examining the principle (*li*) that one was meant to fulfill.
- The next text in Zhu Xi's streamlined educational curriculum was the *Analects*. This text consists of 20 chapters of aphorisms attributed to Confucius, brief dialogues, or anecdotes about his life. The book seems to have had its origin with his students, who recorded some of their favorite sayings or stories about their beloved teacher after his death.
- Confucius's engaging, inspiring personality seems to come through in his debates with students and government officials about education, ritual, literature, history, wealth and poverty, statecraft, friendship, and ethical behavior. He is generally enthusiastic and generous, yet there are also times when he is frustrated at his

inability to secure appropriate employment, and he is nearly in despair at the death of his favorite student.

- In the *Analects*, Confucius develops the technical terms of humaneness, refinement, righteousness, filial piety, the noble person, moral force, and the Way but not in a systematic fashion. The reported conversations seem to be in random order, and Confucius explains his ideas in different ways to different students. He also tends to offer examples and illustrations rather than rigorous definitions.



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- Later readers have tried to get at the heart of Confucius's teachings, which has given rise to a great body of commentary and competing interpretations. But the fact that Confucian thought can be reconstituted in a variety of ways has allowed it to be continuously relevant in widely differing eras. Students who read the *Analects* as a moral guide come away with respect for authority, reverence for the past, a love of learning, preference for nonviolent reform, moral courage, and exactness in dealing with others.

The enthusiastic and generous personality of Confucius emerges in the *Analects*.

Mencius and the Constant Mean

- The third of the Four Books is the *Mencius*, which is both the name of a book and the name of Confucius's most prominent successor, who lived from 372 to 289 B.C.E. The book has seven chapters, each divided into two parts. It presents extended discourses and reports of advice that Mencius gave to rulers or debates he had with

philosophical opponents. As a result, this later text clarifies many points that had been left somewhat vague by Confucius.

- For instance, Mencius argues at length that human nature is inherently good and that evil comes when people ignore their basic impulses of compassion, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom.
- One of his most famous illustrations is his observation that people instinctively feel alarm or distress when they see a child about to fall into a well. Not everyone runs to the rescue—it's possible to suppress those feelings—but that sort of compassion comes naturally to human beings.
- Because physical and social surroundings are crucial in nurturing the ability to follow good impulses, Mencius emphasizes education, the family, and good government. And he regularly chides rulers who do not lay the economic groundwork necessary for a basic level of well-being for their subjects.
- The *Constant Mean*, or *Doctrine of the Mean*, is another relatively short chapter from the Records of Rites, and it was considered the most subtle and profound of the Four Books. The word “mean” in this case refers to moderation and balance. And these qualities, combined with sincerity, can bring a person into harmony with other human beings and with the cosmos itself. The *Constant Mean* points the way to an almost mystical unity with heaven and earth.

Suggested Reading

Chan, Wing-tsit, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.

Gardner, trans., *The Four Books*.

Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects*.

———, trans., *Mencius*.

Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*.

Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius*.

Nylan and Wilson, *Lives of Confucius*.

Shaughnessy, trans., *I Ching: The Classic of Changes*.

Smith, *The I Ching: A Biography*.

Wilhelm and Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did the Four Books become the basis of the Chinese education system for 600 years?
2. Why do many Chinese believe that the Four Books offer a better introduction to Confucianism than the Five Classics?
3. In what ways are the Four Books a response to the challenge of Buddhism?

Daoism and the Daodejing

Lecture 22

Many of the earliest versions we have of several important texts were recovered in the 20th century from ancient tombs. In some cases, both Confucian and Daoist texts have been discovered in the same tomb, a fact that seems to contradict the traditional view of Confucianism and Daoism as bitterly competing philosophies. In this lecture, we'll explore that traditional view and learn why scholars no longer believe it is correct. We'll also delve into the Daodejing and a book with which it has been associated, the Zhuangzi. As we'll see, both texts offer challenges to our ordinary ways of thinking.

Early Daoism

- According to the standard story, the philosophy of Daoism was founded by a man referred to as Laozi or Master Lao, an older contemporary of Confucius. After several years of teaching his ideas, Laozi became frustrated with conditions in China and set out for the western regions beyond its borders. The gatekeeper stopped him and begged him to put some of his ideas into writing so that they wouldn't be lost. Laozi thereupon wrote the Daodejing ("The Classic of the Way and Its Power") and was never heard from again.
 - Later students of Daoism adopted Laozi's ideas and created a philosophical school that competed with Confucianism. Then, after the fall of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century C.E., when Confucianism declined, Daoism became more prominent, but in the process, it turned into a religion rather than a philosophy, complete with gods, rituals, a priesthood, and a canon of scripture.
 - As a native-born religion, it provided a Chinese alternative to Buddhism. Educated Chinese continued to view Daoism primarily as a philosophy, but the common people were awed by the miracles, ceremonies, and spectacles of its religious practitioners.

- Unfortunately, not much of this familiar story of Daoism stands up to scholarly scrutiny. The Daodejing appears to be a collection of sayings and folk wisdom that accumulated over a couple of centuries, down to about 300 B.C.E. It's doubtful that it was written by one individual, let alone by a contemporary of Confucius.
- The whole notion that there were distinct philosophical schools in pre-imperial China seems to be, like Laozi's biography, a Han dynasty invention, reading contemporary divisions back into the past. The *Records of the Historian*, one of China's earliest histories, includes an essay outlining the basic beliefs of six schools, but with the exception of one (the Mohists), these schools actually represent an eclectic mix of ideas. Daoists and Confucians were not bitter rivals in early China, and it's not clear that teachers whom we today regard as Daoist would have used that term to describe themselves.
- During the Han dynasty, there emerged a sense of what "Daoists" believed, but as we saw with Confucianism, our modern Western categories of philosophy versus religion don't quite apply in ancient China. Thinkers with Daoist tendencies addressed political and ethical matters and speculated about the nature of reality, yet they also offered a path to transcendence and an escape from worldly concerns through meditation and spiritual disciplines.

The Daodejing

- The standard text of the Daodejing, also known as the Laozi, was established in the 3rd century C.E. (though its origins are much older) in a commentary by Wang Bi. The Laozi consists of two parts of roughly equal length: the Daojing ("Classic of the Way") and the Dejing ("Classic of Power or Virtue").
- The Daodejing is relatively short, with each of its 81 chapters taking up only a page or two. It is written in a terse, almost cryptic style. There are striking images, and it is wonderfully suggestive. It seems as if it means so much, even when it is difficult to put one's finger on exactly what's going on.

- The combination of brevity and profundity has made the Daodejing irresistible to commentators and translators. More than 350 Chinese commentaries are extant, and there are now more than 300 translations into English. In fact, the Daodejing is probably the best known work of Chinese culture.
- The overriding concern of the Daodejing is the Dao, or the Way, which is a transcendent order underlying all phenomena. It is somehow connected with nature, as opposed to human artifice, but ultimately, it is beyond words. According to the Daodejing, the Way is eternal, inexhaustible, and the origin of all things.
- The Daodejing is a book of wisdom; to live peacefully and fully, it advises that we need to bring our thoughts and deeds into harmony with the Dao. Or, rather, we should avoid overthinking and practice *wu wei* (“nonaction” or “effortless action”). The goal is to act spontaneously, without trying to force a situation one way or another.
- The Daodejing upends some common assumptions: It might be beneficial or even preferable to adopt more stereotypically feminine characteristics—deference, quietude, passiveness—even in circumstances where traditionally masculine virtues hold sway, such as politics. One should be wary of ambition, desires, and possessions.
- Much of the Daodejing is directed toward rulers, and Laozi informs them that rather than forceful leadership and conquest, a small state with an unobtrusive government might, in the end, yield better results. At a time of incessant conflict (the Warring States period), a ruler who kept out of the limelight and avoided direct confrontation might fare better than one who was eager to lead his people into battle.

Recent Scholarship on Daoist Texts

- For nearly two millennia, the Chinese have read and savored the Daodejing, and they have wanted to attribute its wisdom to a historical sage named Laozi. Yet modern scholars have had serious doubts about its authorship. The Daodejing seems to be a jumble

Selections from the Daodejing

On the Way:

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way. A name that can be named is not a constant name. Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and earth; Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures. (Ivanhoe, trans.)

A thing was formed murkily; she was generated before heaven and earth. Silent and vast, unique she stands and does not change; She turns full circle and is not used up. She can be the mother of the world. I do not know her name; I entitle her the Way. (Ryden, trans.)

On practicing *wu wei*:

Attain utmost emptiness. Maintain steadfast tranquility ... Be like heaven and merge with the Tao, One with the Tao, you will last long. You may die but will never perish. (Kohn, trans.)

On rulership:

The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the people will be. The more sharp weapons the people have, the more troubled the state will be. The more cunning and skill man possesses, the more vicious things will appear. The more laws and orders are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers there will be. Therefore the sage says: I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple. (Chan, trans.)

On self-cultivation:

In preserving the soul and embracing the One, can you avoid departing from them? In concentrating your qi and arriving at utmost weakness, can you be like an infant? In cleansing and purifying your profound insight, can you be without fault? In loving the people and governing the state, can you be without knowledge? In the opening and closing of the gates of Heaven, can you play the role of the female? In understanding all within the four reaches, can you do nothing (*wuwei*)? (Bloom, trans.)

of proverbs, paradoxes, observations, and advice, with frequent repetitions and disjunctions. It appears to have started as an oral compilation of aphorisms that was added to and rearranged over time—something like the biblical book of Proverbs—and then attributed to the Old Master.

- In the late 4th century, a version of this memorized wisdom tradition was written down. The oldest extant copy was found in a tomb at Guodian in 1993 and dated to about 300 B.C.E. It is recognizably the Daodejing that we know today, but it is only about 40 percent of the current text, and the individual sayings are not in the same order. The Guodian text may be a selection of someone's favorite lines from a more complete work, an earlier version that was added to later, or an alternative version. It does not seem to be a work that was written in close to its final form by a contemporary of Confucius.
- Two somewhat later copies were found at Mawangdui in 1973, dated to about 200 B.C.E. and 170 B.C.E. These versions are quite close to the standard 3rd-century-C.E. text of Wang Bi, although they have some variations, and most curiously, the order of the two major sections is reversed.
- As interesting as such archaeological finds are to textual scholars, historians have been anxious to understand the role of the Daodejing in Chinese culture. For his two volumes of Daoist classics in the 19th-century *Sacred Books of the East*, James Legge translated both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, a longer prose work supposedly written by a 4th-century-B.C.E. philosopher of that name. Ever since, Westerners have read the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi together as the foundational texts of Daoism. The Chinese themselves have considered Zhuangzi to have been an early follower of Laozi, but again, that assumption has not held up under close scrutiny.
- The Zhuangzi is a spectacular work of literature and philosophy, with arresting insights that challenge ordinary ways of thinking. It also overlaps with ideas of the Daodejing: Zhuangzi writes about the Dao and spontaneous action; he praises “perfected persons”

who have transcended the physical and social constraints of ordinary life; and he is skeptical of human judgments and limited perspectives. Zhuangzi is perhaps most famous for dreaming he was a butterfly and then waking up and being unsure whether he wasn't now a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi.

- Yet there are also stark differences between Zhuangzi and Laozi. Zhuangzi rejects political activity outright; he doesn't discuss nonaction; and he doesn't urge the adoption of stereotypically feminine qualities. Before the Han dynasty, no one thought to categorize Zhuangzi and Laozi in the same philosophical school, and in fact, modern scholars believe that Zhuangzi came first. His core writings preceded the compilation of the Daodejing.
- The Zhuangzi has been influential in Asian culture, particularly in Zen Buddhism, and it has been justly celebrated in the West. Still, it doesn't have nearly the stature of the Daodejing, which became sacred scripture for many. During the late Han dynasty, Laozi came to be regarded as an immortal, a cosmic deity, and a savior of humankind, and reciting the Daodejing became a devotional exercise with magical possibilities.

Suggested Reading

Hendricks, trans., *Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao Ching*.

Ivanhoe, trans., *The Daodejing of Laozi*.

Kirkland, *Taoism*.

Kohn, *Introducing Daoism*.

Kohn and LaFargue, eds., *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*.

Lao, trans., *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*.

Mair, trans., *Tao Te Ching*.

Palmer, trans., *The Book of Chuang Tzu*.

Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*.

Questions to Consider

1. If the Dao is so important, why is it so hard to talk about?
2. What do archeological finds of the last 40 years add to our understanding of the Daodejing?

The Three Caverns of Daoist Scriptures

Lecture 23

Westerners have been reading the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi for more than 100 years, but scholars have also been aware of a much larger canon of Daoist scriptures, the Daozang. It's a complex and sometimes confusing collection of nearly 1,500 texts, whose contents were, until recently, mostly unknown in the West. In this lecture, we'll discuss the development of that collection and the rise of various Daoist movements. Note, however, that Daoism is not a cohesive religion along the lines of Buddhism or Christianity; it's more of a loose family of religions, similar to Hinduism, with different groups claiming their own revelations and scriptures. In recent decades, many of these texts have been translated into English for the first time.

Early Daoists

- In the last lecture, we saw how some thinkers in pre-imperial China who taught about the Way, simplicity, and spiritual transformation were grouped together under the label “Daoist” in the early Han dynasty. Since the 1980s, Western scholars have come to view another early text as nearly as critically important in proto-Daoism as Laozi and Zhuangzi.
 - This is the *Neiye* (“*Inward Training*”), dated to between 350 and 300 B.C.E. and preserved as a chapter in a long book attributed to the philosopher Guanzi.
 - The *Inward Training* is a relatively short work of rhymed prose that urges readers to live in harmony with the Dao by purifying their *xin* (“heart-mind”) and *qi* (“vital energy”) through breathing exercises, dietary regulation, and meditation. By so doing, one can become a sage.
- Since the late 20th century, our knowledge of another strand of proto-Daoism has been greatly enriched by the discovery of previously unknown texts from tombs. In particular, a tomb at Mawangdui,

dating to 168 B.C.E., yielded four texts that have been categorized by scholars as Huang-Lao writings. *Huang* is the Chinese word for “yellow,” referring to the mythical Yellow Emperor, and *Lao* refers to Laozi. This school combines Daoist concepts with ideas about government and cosmology.

- The most important example of Huang-Lao thought is the lengthy, eclectic *Huainanzi*, written by scholars in about 139 B.C.E. This work draws heavily on the Daodejing and Zhuangzi, but it combines Daoists perspectives with Confucianism, Legalism, yinyang thought, and Five Phases cosmology.

Celestial Masters and Ge Hong

- The first organized groups of Daoists appeared in the late Han dynasty (2nd century C.E.), though they were not educated elites but rebels. In 142, Zhang Daoling, in central China, claimed that Lord Lao (the deified Laozi, the personification of the Dao) appeared to him in a vision and told him that the end of the world was near. Zhang thereby became the first of the Celestial Masters.
 - Zhang gathered followers who would be part of a new theocratic state and asked all recruits to donate grain to the cause. He taught that one could preserve one’s *qi* by limiting food and sex and that illness was the result of sin, which required confession and repentance.
 - Zhang also had his followers memorize and chant the Daodejing, and Zhang’s grandson, the third Celestial Master, wrote a commentary on the Daodejing called the *Xiang’er* that was also recited. The *Xiang’er* includes explanations of cryptic lines in the Daodejing, as well as 27 precepts, such as “Do not do evil” and “Do not study false texts.”
- Also in the 2nd century C.E., in east China, another group of Daoist rebels arose, who became known as the Yellow Turbans; they eventually merged with the Celestial Masters. The Yellow Turbans were inspired by a text called the *Taipingjing* (“*Scripture on Great Peace*”).

- This is a lengthy transcript of conversations between a Celestial Master and six of his disciples. In his answers to their questions, the Celestial Master teaches about meditation and healing through medicinal plants, talismans, acupuncture, and music.
- He also indicates that an era of great peace will ensue when rulers follow the Dao. Unfortunately, that could happen only after the destruction of the current corrupt government; thus, the Yellow Turbans launched a rebellion in 184 C.E.
- The political situation was confused for the next 30 years, but religious rebels managed to set up a theocratic state in Sichuan for a while before surrendering to General Cao Cao in 215 and being dispersed throughout China. The lineage of Celestial Masters continues to this day in Taiwan.
- The Way of the Celestial Masters and the Yellow Turbans were popular mass movements. In the aftermath of the Han dynasty, Daoism also appealed to scholars, including Ge Hong (283–343). Ge was an official who had been trained in the Confucian classics, but he was also interested in Daoist immortals, texts, and practices, as well as the possibility of achieving longevity through alchemy.
 - Ge Hong wrote the *Baopuzi* (“*Master of Embracing Simplicity*”), which is divided into 20 Inner and 50 Outer Chapters. The Inner Chapters are devoted to esoteric techniques of attaining transcendence or immortality through alchemy, meditation, visualizations, gymnastics, and so on. The Outer Chapters are devoted to the mainstream political thought and moral principles of Confucianism and Legalism.
 - *The Master of Embracing Simplicity* is not Daoist scripture, though it was included in the Daozang in the 15th century, but Ge Hong’s work is a key text in helping us understand early Daoism. Indeed, he is one of those figures who make it difficult to draw a distinction between a refined philosophical Daoism and a superstitious religious Daoism devoted to magic and immortality; in Ge’s writings, the two strands go together.

Shangqing and Lingbao

- After the fall of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century, educated northerners fled south, taking some of these Daoists texts and traditions with them and asserting their right to rule. Displaced southern aristocrats responded by discovering their own superior versions of teachings about the Dao, from higher sources than those claimed by the Celestial Masters.
- Some 20 years after Ge Hong's death, from 364 to 370, a spirit medium named Yang Xi, living near Nanjing, began to receive midnight visitations from a group of deities descended from the Heaven of Highest Clarity (Shangqing). From these visitations, he learned about the organization of the heavens, met several celestial beings, and received scriptures, which he recorded.
- About a century later, a scholar named Tao Hongjing (456–536) collected all the Shangqing revelations he could find and compiled them into a text called the *Declarations of the Perfected*. Because this was an aristocratic, elite form of Daoism that put a great deal of emphasis on literary achievement, the revelations that came through Yang Xi were often in the form of exquisite poetry.
- A few decades after Yang Xi, another branch of Daoism was established, the Numinous Treasure School (Lingbao). Around 399, a grand-nephew of Ge Hong named Ge Chaofu compiled some of his inherited family mystical traditions into a text known as the *Five Talismans*.
 - Ge Chaofu claimed that these abstract, magical designs were instrumental in creation and had been hidden in a sacred mountain by the mythical emperor Yu. Eventually, they were revealed to a 2nd-century ancestor of Ge Chaofu, making these texts older than those of the Highest Clarity School.
 - Many Numinous Treasure texts followed. They offered a plethora of sacred diagrams and charts, drew upon Buddhist ideas, established public rituals for talisman activation, introduced new gods and heavens, and offered salvation to all.

The Daozang

- In the 5th century, a few people sensed that these various regional religious movements and lineages had enough in common that they could be brought together into something called “Daoism.” At a time when Buddhism was gaining in popularity, some scholars felt that it was important to meet the challenge of that foreign religion with a system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and scriptures that were indigenous to China. Lu Xiuqing (406–477), a Daoist priest, was one such scholar.
- He gathered as many sacred texts as he could find and organized them into three groups, which he called the Three Caverns. This became the basis of the Daozang or Daoist canon. There was the Cavern of Perfection, consisting of Supreme Clarity scriptures; the Cavern of Mystery, containing the Numinous Treasure scriptures; and the Cavern of Spirit, made up of the writings of yet another school of Daoism, that of the Three Sovereigns.
- About a century after the work of Lu Xiuqing, four supplements were added—one for each of the Caverns, plus a general category. The Cavern of Perfection was supplemented by texts based on the Daodejing; the Cavern of Mystery was supplemented by texts based on the *Scripture on the Great Peace*; and the Cavern of Spirit was supplemented by Taiqing texts (having to do with alchemy and physical exercises). The fourth, unattached supplement consisted of Celestial Master scriptures.
- The Daoist canon kept getting larger, and in the 7th century, the texts in each of the Three Caverns were arranged into 12 subsections. From the 8th to the 13th centuries, perhaps half a dozen projects were undertaken to compile a complete Daoist canon, but all of those early versions were lost in the wars and rebellions of medieval Chinese history.
- Finally, a Ming dynasty edition of the complete canon was published in 1445, which included some 1,400 texts. Additional texts were added in 1607, bringing the total to about 1,500. Printing

this collection was a tremendous project, requiring imperial sponsorship. This edition is the origin of all current copies of the Daoist canon.

- It is an eclectic collection, which includes not only Daoist scriptures but also the works of non-Daoist philosophers. There are works of alchemy; descriptions of heavens, spirits, and gods; liturgical texts; and more.
- The Daoist scriptures were never intended to be widely distributed or studied. Even after the publication of the canon in 1445, it was available in only a few Daoist monasteries.
 - A modern edition of the canon (60 volumes) was finally published in Shanghai in the 1920s, with help from the republican government. The 500 sets that were printed were sold to libraries around the world. For most of the 20th century, however, the contents of the Daoist canon were still difficult for scholars to access, much less ordinary readers.
 - In 2004, the University of Chicago published a three-volume catalogue of the Daoist canon, giving brief descriptions for every text it contains. In 2008, Rutledge came out with a two-volume *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, which offers clear explanations of major works. These scholarly sources are available in university libraries; for self-study of Daoist texts, Livia Kohn's anthology *The Taoist Experience* is highly recommended.

Suggested Reading

Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*.

Despeux and Kohn, *Women in Daoism*.

Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace*.

Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture*.

———, ed., *The Taoist Experience*.

Major, Queen, Meyer, and Roth, trans., *The Huainanzi*.
Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*.
Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*.
Roth, *Original Tao and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*.
Sailey, *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity*.
Schipper and Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon*.
Thompson, "Taoism: Classic and Canon."
Ware, *Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320*.
Yates, trans., *Five Lost Classics*.

Questions to Consider

1. How have scholars in the last few decades modified their views about the origins and development of Daoism?
2. Why is the massive canon of Daoist sacred texts so little known in the West?

Related Traditions—Shinto and Tenrikyo

Lecture 24

Shinto is a rather unusual faith. It is very much concerned with divinities, purification, and the unseen world, yet it has no official scriptures. Shinto is a native Japanese religion concerned with harmonizing the human and natural worlds and regulating relationships with kami—local divinities that are powerful but not necessarily perfect or even immortal. *Kami* is also a term that describes the numinous power found in natural phenomena, such as mountains and seas, earthquakes and storms, and even extraordinary animals and humans. Rather than a set of doctrines, Shinto is more a collection of rituals by which people pay homage to the kami, purify themselves from ritual pollution, celebrate life stages, or express solidarity with their neighbors.

Introduction to Shinto

- Shinto is an unusual faith, with no official scriptures. It is closely tied to the Japanese landscape, with thousands of local shrines; it's connected to Japanese history, especially to the origins of the imperial family; and it's a part of many Japanese customs—from annual festivals to mundane events, such as the opening of a business.
- Many Japanese don't consider themselves religious but still participate in Shinto ceremonies. Shinto doesn't require any particular beliefs; it is often thought simply to be an aspect of Japanese life. And because it's rather amorphous in its beliefs, it has long coexisted with Buddhism and Confucianism. People can draw from all three traditions without fear of contradiction or heresy.
- Although Shinto does not have scriptures in the way that we usually think of them, there are nevertheless respected ancient texts that are closely associated with Shinto myths, rituals, and sensibilities. The two most important are early histories of Japan known as the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. These texts don't provide a

foundation for a prescribed set of doctrines or a moral code, but the narratives they recount can tell us something about the values and concerns of the religion, particularly in their first chapters, which include myths of origins.

The *Kojiki*

- In the 7th and 8th centuries C.E., Japan received an influx of cultural innovations from China, initially coming via Korea. The Japanese were exposed to Chinese statecraft, literature, and philosophy; Buddhism came from China to Japan; and the first writing system for the Japanese language was developed, based on Chinese characters. Of course, the Japanese had myths and legends that had been transmitted orally for many generations, but in the 8th century, these were first written down by government officials in two books.
- The *Kojiki* (“*Records of Ancient Matters*”) dates to 712 C.E. It was composed orally in Japanese and then transcribed into an idiosyncratic writing system that uses Chinese characters both phonetically and semantically. The *Nihon shoki* (“*Chronicles of Japan*”), sometimes known in the West as the *Nihon-gi*, appeared eight years later, in 720. It’s longer, more systematic, and written in the Classical Chinese language.
- The *Kojiki* is divided into three parts; the first tells of divinities and mythical origins, and the next two record genealogical details and anecdotes of emperors from legendary times to the death of Empress Suiko in 628 C.E.



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Shinto is an unusual religion in that it focuses on divinities, purification, and the unseen world, yet it has no official scriptures or teachings.

- The text begins with a number of deities coming into existence, including the male Izanagi (“He Who Invites”) and the female Izanami (“She Who Invites”), who were married to each other.
- The god and goddess agree to produce children through sexual intercourse after they walk around a heavenly pillar. Izanami speaks first, but they both realize that this is improper, and their first child is born malformed.
- They then walk around the pillar again, with Izanagi speaking first, and their subsequent children, the 14 islands of Japan, are all lovely. They continue having children—some 35 kami of oceans and rivers, mountains, winds, trees, and so on—until Izanami dies in childbirth trying to deliver the fire god.
- The stories of the human emperors are rather tame in comparison to those of the gods, though it is significant that the grandson of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, presented the first emperor of Japan (also her descendant) with three sacred objects: a curved jewel, a mirror, and a sword. These ancient sacred objects are still used in the enthronement ceremonies of Japanese emperors.
- The tales in the *Kojiki* are somewhat strange, but in them, we can see some of the characteristic concerns of Shinto: kami and the natural world; life, death, and reproduction; proper order, gender relations, and purification rituals; and the divine origins of both Japan and the Japanese royal family.

Nihon shoki* and *Norito

- Because the odd writing system of the *Kojiki* is so difficult to decipher, it was not read much until the 18th century; further, the *Nihon shoki*, written in relatively clear Classical Chinese, related many of the same stories, often in more detail and with variant versions.
 - The *Nihon shoki* has 30 chapters, the first 2 of which recount mythical stories similar to those of the *Kojiki*.

- The next 28 chapters offer stories of the Japanese emperors, from the legendary Jimmu (said to have lived in the 7th century B.C.E.), to more historical times (starting in about the 6th century C.E.), to the reign of Empress Jito, which ended in 697.
- The *Kojiki* and the *Nihon-gi* were never particularly popular, but because they are the oldest Japanese books, they are often mentioned with regard to Shinto. A better candidate for Shinto “scripture,” according to the scholar Joseph Kitagawa, is the *norito*, preserved in the *Engi-shiki* (“*Institutes of the Engi Era*”) of 927 C.E. This text is a collection of government regulations in 50 chapters.
 - Most of the book deals with various offices and ministries charged with taxation, military affairs, justice, and so forth. But the first 10 chapters cover Shinto matters, from festivals and rituals to rules for priests and shrines. The 9th and 10th chapters provide a list of 3,132 kami and the names and locations of their shrines throughout Japan.
 - The *norito* is found in chapter 8, and it consists of 27 ritual prayers, including praises of the kami, liturgies for various shrines and festivals, petitions for good harvests and the protection of the royal palace, and much more. Unlike the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon-gi*, the ritual prayers of the *norito* were memorized by priests and used regularly in worship, in ways that are similar to the sacred texts of other religious traditions.

Later Shinto

- As you recall, Buddhism played a large role in Japanese history, and for the most part, Buddhism and Shinto coexisted fairly easily. Buddhist monks and Shinto priests worked closely together, and today, most Japanese who participate in Shinto ceremonies also take part in Buddhist rituals on occasion, as well.
- One of the most interesting figures in the history of Shinto was Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), one of Japan’s greatest scholars. Over the course of nearly 35 years of study, he painstakingly deciphered the writing system and grammar of the *Kojiki*, believing it

to be truer to an original Japanese version of religion than the *Nihon shoki*, which had been substantially influenced by Chinese thought.

- Motoori's multivolume, heavily annotated translation was one of the triumphs of the National Studies movement, which sought to understand Japan's native culture.
- Motoori combined a brilliant, critical scholarly analysis of the text with an absolute faith in the kami and their powers. At a time when Westerners were struggling with the implications of academic approaches to the Bible (roughly the era of the American Revolution), Motoori was trying to reconcile his strong commitment to rationality with his belief in the literal reality of the myths in the *Kojiki*.
- Motoori was never quite successful in establishing the *Kojiki* as the sacred scriptural foundation for a Shinto, but during the Meiji Restoration, there was an attempt to make Shinto, purged of Buddhist elements, the official religion of Japan.
 - The Meiji Restoration began in 1868 in the aftermath of foreign incursions into a Japan that had sealed itself off from the outside world for two centuries. Some mid-level samurai wrested control of the nation from the shogun in Tokyo and, claiming to act on behalf of the emperor, embarked on one of the most rapid and successful programs of modernization in world history.
 - In the hope that Shinto might offer a focus for a new national identity, it was declared the sole basis of the government. (Keep in mind that Shinto provided legitimacy for rule by the imperial family, given that there has been only a single dynasty in Japanese history.) Over the next few years, the government took control of all Shinto shrines, and Shinto priests became state employees.
 - There was a backlash from Japanese Buddhists and Christian missionaries, who wanted a more secular government

with guarantees of religious freedom, and eventually, the government gave in.

- In 1882, a law was enacted dividing the religion into Shrine Shinto and Sect Shinto. Shrine Shinto, encompassing tens of thousands of local shrines, could continue to be promoted and regulated by the state because it was declared to be a nonreligious expression of Japanese morality and patriotism. Sect Shinto recognized some 13 new religious movements, including Tenrikyo.
- In the early 20th century, Shrine Shinto became entangled with ultranationalism and absolute loyalty to the emperor at a time of increasing militarism, and it was eventually seen as a factor in the lead-up to Japanese aggression in World War II. During the occupation, ties between the government and local shrines were severed. Since that time, Shinto has been regarded as a benign, if unusual, religion.

Tenrikyo

- Over the last two centuries, Japan has been the site of several impressive new religions, including Tenrikyo, which was one of the 13 prewar denominations labeled as Sect Shinto. But Tenrikyo is quite different from Shinto; it is monotheistic, and it has a strong tradition of canonized sacred texts.
- Tenrikyo was founded by a peasant woman named Nakayama Miki (1798–1887). On October 26, 1838, she went into a trance and was possessed by Tenri O no Mikoto, a deity who claimed to be the creator, the true and real kami, God the Parent. He requested Nakayama as his living shrine and spokesperson. For the next 50 years, Miki continued to receive revelations from this divinity and taught them to her followers.
- Tenrikyo recognizes three books of scripture: the Ofudesaki (“Tip of the Writing Brush”), comprising 1,711 short poems written by Miki, primarily from 1874 to 1882; the Mikagura-uta (“Songs for

the Service”), which is 14 songs written by Miki and used in regular worship ceremonies; and the Osashizu (“Divine Directions”), seven volumes of nearly 20,000 revelations given by Miki’s successor, Izo Iburi, from 1887 to 1907.

Suggested Reading

Aston, trans., *Nihongi*.

Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*.

Bock, trans., *Engi-Shiki*.

Earhart, *Japanese Religion*.

Nakayama, *Ofudesaki*.

Philippi, trans., *Kojiki*.

———, trans., *Norito*.

Thomsen, *The New Religions of Japan*.

Questions to Consider

1. How did two early histories of Japan end up playing a scripture-like role in Shinto?
2. Why has Tenrikyo been one of the few 19th-century religions to continue growing into the 21st century?

Christian Testaments Old and New

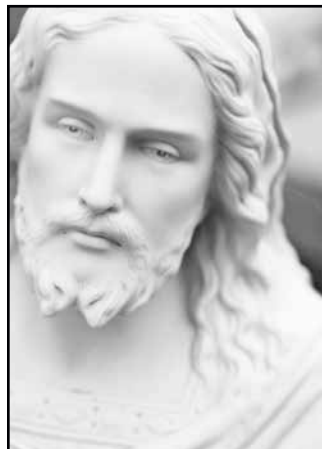
Lecture 25

Despite the fact that all Christians view the Bible as authoritative, there is a tremendous variety of doctrine and practice among different denominations in Christianity. In the next few lectures, we'll look at the origins and different voices within the Christian portion of the Bible, the New Testament. Today, the Christian Bible is nearly everywhere; it is the most published book in history, with more translations into more languages than any other text, sacred or otherwise. Yet the Bible's path from the ancient world to contemporary bookshelves and pulpits has been rather complicated. There's a fascinating story behind the book that is familiar to so many.

Hebrew Scriptures in Greek

- Christianity began in 1st-century Palestine as a Jewish reform movement. Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews who spoke Aramaic and could read the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus was apparently a charismatic teacher and miracle worker, but he didn't write anything himself, and no firsthand accounts of him have survived in Aramaic or Hebrew. The only records we have are in Greek; thus, everything we know about Jesus has been edited and translated at least once.
- According to Christian sources from the late 1st century (especially Acts 2–3, 8), in Greek, Jesus's followers saw him as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. They claimed that his life had been foretold in some of the Psalms, that he was the future prophet that Moses had spoken of in Deuteronomy 18, and that Isaiah's description of God's suffering servant in Isaiah 53 was about Jesus. There were some creative reinterpretations in these readings.
 - For instance, although there had been a long tradition in Judaism of a coming Messiah, the term *messiah* ("anointed one") is always used in the Tanakh to refer to a human figure.

- The notion that the Messiah would be a spiritual rather than a political leader and that he would suffer for the sins of others was a Christian reinterpretation.
- The larger point here is that the first Christians did not have any sacred texts of their own; they accepted the Jewish scriptures as authoritative. But Christianity's rise to prominence didn't begin until it was taken out of its original Jewish context and put into the larger Greco-Roman world by missionaries. Gentile Christians and even Jewish converts outside of Palestine adopted the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—as their first scripture.
 - But translations can be tricky. For example, the Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *almah* (“young woman”) in Isaiah 7:14 as *parthenos*, or “virgin”; thus, the verse reads, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”
 - Early Christians, reading the Greek version, seized upon this as a prophecy of Jesus's virgin birth, even though the Hebrew doesn't exactly say that.



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The first generations of Christians did not have their own sacred text, and the one that eventually came together is removed from the historical Jesus who stands at the center of the faith.

The First Christian Writings

- The first Christian writings were not the Gospels but the letters of Paul, the earliest of which, 1 Thessalonians, was written about 49–51 C.E., about 20 years after the death of Jesus. Paul began as an opponent of Christianity, but after a visionary experience, he

joined the Christian movement and became one of its most successful missionaries.

- Paul went on three missionary journeys though Palestine, Turkey, and Greece, preaching the Christian gospel, establishing local congregations, then moving on. Every so often, Paul wrote letters, in Greek, back to the Christian communities he had founded or, in the case of Romans, to a Christian community he hoped to visit.
- In these letters, Paul clarifies doctrine, answers questions, calls people to repentance, and inspires new Christians to greater faith and commitment. He gives no indication that he thought his compositions should stand side-by-side with Hebrew scriptures. His letters were to specific people in response to specific needs. When we read them today, we're overhearing written conversations from long ago, which are sometimes difficult to interpret.
- Somewhat strikingly, Paul doesn't have much to say about the life of Jesus; he mainly talks about his death and resurrection. Perhaps this is because Paul didn't know the Jesus who existed before the Crucifixion, or perhaps Paul was adapting the Christian message to fit his audience.
 - Yet Paul also drew heavily on Hebrew concepts. In one of the rare instances where Paul reports Jesus's words, he says that at the Last Supper, Jesus blessed the bread and wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25); in a later letter, he refers to himself as a "minister of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). These seem to be allusions to the new covenant promised by the prophet Jeremiah many centuries earlier (Jer. 31:31–33).
 - Later Christians would speak of their scriptures as a "new covenant," a phrase that was translated into English as "New Testament," but in Paul's lifetime, we still don't have a Christian Bible.

The Gospels and Other Books

- Just before 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple, an anonymous Christian wrote a biographical sketch of Jesus's life. This would later be called the Gospel of Mark.
 - Within the next couple of decades, two more Christians produced revised, expanded versions of Mark's gospel, apparently drawing on a short collection of Jesus's sayings now called Q (Matthew and Luke).
 - In about 90 C.E.—some 60 years after Jesus's death—yet another gospel was written, based on a different set of sources that seem to have been connected with the apostle John.
- Over the next century, Christians continued writing new documents, including letters, sermons, histories, apocalyptic discourses, and more gospels. These all circulated separately and were accepted as authoritative by some local congregations and not others.
- By the end of the 2nd century, most Christians accepted the four standard gospels and some set of Paul's letters, but other books were disputed, including Hebrews, Revelation, 2–3 John, Jude, and 2 Peter, along with writings that never made it into the New Testament: the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas, Apocalypse of Peter, and 1 Clement.
- These writings were sometimes read in church services, along with selections from the Septuagint, and were consulted when doctrinal questions arose. To promote a unity of belief and practice, it eventually became necessary to sort out which writings were to be considered reliable and authoritative.
 - In the 2nd century, a bishop named Marcion (d. c. 160) proposed a radical suggestion. In reading the Septuagint, Marcion came to the conclusion that the Jewish god of the Old Testament was an angry, vengeful deity who was entirely separate from, and inferior to, the God preached by Jesus.

- He argued that the Christians should declare themselves a new religion, drop the Jewish scriptures altogether, and adopt a small canon consisting of just 11 books: a shortened version of the Gospel of Luke and 10 letters of Paul. His ideas didn't go far; Marcion was excommunicated and the church reaffirmed its belief in the Septuagint as sacred scripture.
- But if Marcion's Bible would have been too small, others worried that the list of sacred texts might grow too large and encompass all sorts of contradictory writings. It appears that Christian leaders came to evaluate texts on three criteria: Did they claim to be written by apostles or their associates? Were they accepted by numerous communities of Christians? Did they teach doctrine in harmony with the four gospels and the major letters of Paul?
- In the 4th century, we begin to get lists of commonly accepted texts, and finally, in an Easter letter of 367, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, provides the first list that exactly matches the 27 books of the New Testament today. These consist of the four gospels; the book of Acts; 21 letters, mostly written by Paul; and the book of Revelation.
- Athanasius's letter didn't entirely settle the matter. The earliest surviving manuscript copies of the complete Christian Bible are from the late 4th and early 5th centuries, and they still include some noncanonical writings, but for the most part, there came to be a sharp division between the sacred texts on Athanasius's list—that is, the New Testament—and other early Christian writings that might be considered useful and inspiring but not scripture.

Later Developments and Translations

- In the early 16th century, the issue of the Christian canon was reopened by Martin Luther. Luther had published a German translation of the New Testament in 1522, but when his translation of the complete Bible appeared in 1534, he placed the books of the Apocrypha in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments.

- Luther also had grave doubts about the doctrinal reliability of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. He kept them in the New Testament but moved them all to the end to signal his wariness about them.
- The Catholic Church responded in 1546 with a decree from the Council of Trent reaffirming its position that the Deuterocanonical books (the Apocrypha) are of equal authority with the rest of the Bible.
- Luther's German Bible was enormously influential, in part because of the invention of the printing press about a century earlier. For the first time, ordinary Christians could acquire personal copies of the Bible and study them on their own. Indeed, one of the rallying cries of the Reformation was *sola scriptura* ("by scripture alone"), the idea being that the final authority in Christianity ought to be the Bible rather than tradition or church authorities.
- This sort of independent-minded attitude toward scripture worried many in the Catholic hierarchy. After Luther's German Bible, the floodgates of vernacular translations opened, culminating in 1611 with the King James Bible.
- When Reformers decided to base their faith on the Bible, it became crucially important to have the most accurate version possible. This meant going back to the original Greek, but unlike the Jewish Tanakh, for which there was a standard text produced by the Masoretic scribes, there was no standard Greek New Testament. Instead, there were dozens of hand-copied manuscripts, no two of which were exactly the same.
- The turn back to Greek sources occurred just about the time that the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire fell to Muslim invaders in 1453. Eastern Orthodox scholars fled to Europe with their precious Greek manuscripts, multiplying the number of manuscripts available. The discovery of additional manuscripts has continued; today, there are more than 5,700, most of which are mere fragments.

- By the late 19th century, it had become obvious that the celebrated King James Bible was not as accurate as it could be. A Revised Version of the King James appeared in 1885, followed by the Revised Standard Version in 1952. Entirely new translations, based on modern scholarly reconstructions of the Greek New Testament soon followed. Today, the standard academic Bible is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Suggested Reading

American Bible Society, “The State of the Bible, 2013.”

Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography*.

Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*.

Johnson, *The New Testament: A Very Short Introduction*.

Peters, *The Voice, the Word, the Books*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways does the Christian Old Testament differ from the Jewish Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible?
2. Why did it take more than 300 years for the Christian New Testament to be canonized in its current form?

Gospels and Acts

Lecture 26

At a time when the New Testament canon was still being sorted out, a Persian prophet named Mani (c. 216–276) began to preach a dualistic religion. Interestingly, Mani wrote down his revelations personally, and subsequent generations came to believe that every religion needed to have its own sacred book, preferably composed by its founder. The New Testament, however, is still an old-style sacred text. It's not a revelation to Jesus but writings about Jesus. Surprisingly, it gives us not one but four authoritative accounts of Jesus's life, and they do not always agree with one another. In this lecture, we'll see how this situation came into being and what these four accounts say.

Matthew and Mark

- The four gospels have traditionally been ordered Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew has the most connection to Jewish scripture, including about a dozen “fulfillment citations,” that is, passages in which something that Jesus did is said to fulfill something that had been said by one of the Hebrew prophets. There are also discussions of how Jesus, far from being a radical critic of Judaism, actually fulfilled the Law of Moses.
- Matthew begins with Jesus's genealogy and birth, then skips nearly three decades to his baptism by John the Baptist. This is followed by a series of narratives of healings, exorcisms, confrontations with religious authorities, and miracles. There are also teaching episodes, such as the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7 with the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and famous sayings, such as “Love your enemies.” Jesus tells a number of parables, or didactic stories, and he preaches of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.
 - These narrative bits, called pericopes, are mostly independent of one another. That is, they are anecdotes without many chronological connections. It would be difficult to construct a

tight biography from them because it's not exactly clear what happened when.

- In fact, the four gospels are not really like modern biographies because they don't try to recount Jesus's life in detail from beginning to end. Rather, they offer a few characteristic acts or sayings of Jesus to give readers a sense of the man.
- Yet on closer inspection, the narratives are not exactly in random order. The stories of Jesus's preaching, as opposed to his actions, are grouped into five sections, the first of which is the Sermon on the Mount.
- Many scholars have suggested that this is not coincidental. Matthew may have organized Jesus's major sayings into five discourses that are reminiscent of the five books of Moses. In other words, the basic structure of the book of Matthew presents Jesus as the new lawgiver.
- The gospel ends with an account of the Last Supper, Jesus's arrest, Crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.
- With the opening of the Gospel of Mark, it's clear that something new is happening. Mark, using political and theological terms of the time, proclaims: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God" (New International Version: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the son of God").
 - Even though Jesus's identity is made clear to readers from the beginning, those who are around Jesus during his lifetime don't seem to realize who he is, in part because he tells those who figure out that he is the Messiah not to tell anyone.
 - Mark uses many of the same stories and sayings that are in Matthew, but he constructs a portrait of Jesus as a suffering Messiah, which is not exactly what people of the time expected.

- The Gospel of Mark seems truncated compared to Matthew. It begins with Jesus's baptism instead of his birth, and it ends rather abruptly. There is an account of the Last Supper, followed by Jesus's arrest, Crucifixion, and burial. It then tells the story of Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James; and Salome finding the tomb empty three days later.
 - A man in white appeared, telling the women that Jesus had been resurrected and instructing them to tell Peter and the other disciples. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts end with this: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (NRSV).
 - This is an unsatisfying ending. A longer ending of 10 additional verses was added to the text later, but scholars are unsure whether there was an original conclusion that was somehow lost earlier or whether Mark had intended to leave his readers wondering about what had happened to Jesus.
 - There's a good chance that the short ending was deliberate. Like Matthew, the Gospel of Mark is not a biography of Jesus; it's an invitation to readers to believe. The question is: Now that you know about Jesus's identity as the Messiah, are you going to be like his disciples who abandoned him to the Roman authorities and the women who fled in terror, or are you going to join Mark in proclaiming the good news?

Luke and John

- The Gospel of Luke is much smoother and more refined than Matthew and Mark. The author says that he has put together his account from earlier sources. He addresses someone named Theophilus ("lover of God") and never specifically identifies himself as Luke. In fact, none of the earliest manuscripts of any of the four gospels indicates who wrote them; the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were attached to the gospels in the 2nd century.

- Luke starts with the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the angel's annunciation to Mary that she would be a virgin mother. We learn of Jesus's birth, and then there is one story from his late childhood before the gospel moves on to his ministry when he turned 30, beginning with his baptism by John.
 - Again, we get stories of healings, exorcisms, parables, moral teachings, and debates with religious authorities—many of which we have already seen in Matthew and Mark, though in a different order and with subtle variations.
 - Luke gives more attention to women, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and some of the disreputable elements of society, such as tax collectors, the poor, and Samaritans. Like the other gospels, Luke concludes with the Passion narrative of Jesus's death and resurrection.
- The first three gospels are often called the Synoptic Gospels, from a Greek word meaning "seen together." The Gospel of John, however, is different. Rather than short, independent episodes, it features lengthy discourses in which Jesus, far from trying to hide his identity, openly proclaims his divine status.
- There are only a few stories in John, apart from the Passion narrative, that appear in the other gospels. John has no exorcisms, no parables, and no proclamations of the coming Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus's ministry in John's gospel spans several



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John is often considered the most spiritual or mystical of the four New Testament gospels.

years, with multiple trips to Jerusalem, and the Last Supper is not the Passover meal.

- The Gospel of John is organized into two parts: Chapters 1–12 make up the “book of signs,” that is, miracles demonstrating that Jesus is the Messiah or even God himself in human form, and chapters 13–20 are the “book of glory,” in which Jesus fulfills his divine destiny through his death and resurrection. John ends with an epilogue containing stories about Peter and the risen Lord.

Source Criticism and Redaction Criticism

- Since the 2nd century, Christians have wanted to weave these four accounts together into a single harmonious record of Jesus’s words and deeds. Unfortunately, there are just too many differences and contradictions.
- The last two centuries have seen the rise of the historical-critical method in biblical studies. Scholars try to read the text as carefully as possible, then come to their own reasoned conclusions, without relying on tradition or theology. The goal in such an approach is to make observations and provide explanations that people from different religious perspectives, or even no religion, could agree on.
- One of the major puzzles in New Testament source criticism is the relationship among the three Synoptic Gospels. The wording is often so similar that it is obvious that some of the gospel writers were copying from each other, yet there are significant differences among the three gospels, as well.
 - Based on detailed analysis, the most widely accepted solution to the so-called “Synoptic problem” is the two-source hypothesis. Most scholars believe that Mark was written first; then, Matthew and Luke independently produced revised versions of Mark, omitting some details and stories and adding others.
 - The second source is a hypothetical collection of Jesus’s sayings called Q (from German *quelle*, or “source”). This

would explain why the material that Matthew and Luke have in common that is not in Mark nearly always consists of sayings rather than stories.

- After a consensus was reached about sources, scholars began to analyze exactly what changes Matthew and Luke had made to the Gospel of Mark and to speculate on the theological motivations behind those editorial choices. This approach to the New Testament is called redaction criticism.

The Book of Acts

- After the four gospels, the next book in the New Testament is Acts. It's basically an account of the early Christian community after Jesus's resurrection and tells of missionary efforts and the founding of the church. But it's not exactly an independent work. It's addressed to Theophilus, and it appears to be a sequel to Luke's gospel, written by the same originally anonymous Christian writer.
- Acts begins with the resurrected Jesus being taken up to heaven, followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples at the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Then follows stories of miraculous healings, proclamations of the Christian gospel, and persecutions, mostly focused on the apostle Peter.
- Peter has a revelation directing him to take Christianity to both Jews and non-Jews; then, the second half of Acts focuses on Paul, who does just that. Finally, Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, and when he appeals the charges, he is sent to Rome for trial. The book ends with Paul in the capital city of the empire, under house arrest but preaching the gospel freely.
- One of the major themes in the book of Acts is relations between Christians and Jews. A crucial question is whether Christianity is a sect of Judaism or whether it's more of a new, independent religion. Acts 15 speaks of a gathering of apostles and elders who debated the issue of whether Gentile converts could worship Jesus without first becoming Jews.

- The rest of Acts follows Paul in his missionary endeavors, and indeed, Paul was the most successful of the early Christian missionaries. In the next lecture, we will look more closely at Paul and the Gentile mission, as well as the remaining writings in the New Testament.

Suggested Reading

American Bible Society, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels, Revised Standard Version*.

Attridge, ed., *Harper Collins Study Bible*.

Barton, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*.

Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament*.

Ehrman, *The New Testament*.

Puskas and Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts*.

Throckmorton, Jr., *Gospel Parallels*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean for Christianity that the New Testament has four equally authoritative yet different accounts of the life of Jesus?
2. What are the Synoptic Gospels, and why are they called that?
3. What interpretive tools have scholars developed to make sense of the origins and meaning of variations among the gospels?

Letters and Apocalypse

Lecture 27

So far, we've talked about five books in the New Testament—the four gospels and Acts. Of the next 22 books, 21 are letters, most of which are ascribed to Paul, and the final book is Revelation, an apocalyptic treatise. Letters were apparently a key mode of communication, instruction, and doctrine in the early church. In this lecture, we'll begin with a detailed analysis of one particular letter, 1 Thessalonians, which was written by Paul to a Christian community he had founded, probably around 50 C.E. If we knew nothing else about Christianity, what could we discern from this letter? We will then close the lecture with a brief survey of the other books in the New Testament.

1 Thessalonians

- In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul expresses warm feelings for the members of this community, yet he has been a bit worried about them. The letter is his relieved response to a good report he has received about them. In various verses, he says that he is like a brother, a father, and even a mother to the community. He seems to be pulling out all the stops in his efforts to keep them on his side.



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- It seems that the Thessalonians converted in response to some phenomenon that they interpreted as the Holy Spirit. The letter tells us that they are not converted Jews but former pagans or idol worshippers. This is interesting because Acts, written several decades later, tells us

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was probably written around 50 C.E., making it our earliest extant Christian document.

that Paul attended the synagogue in Thessalonica and attempted to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

- In several verses, Paul mentions that the Thessalonians faced persecution, though once again, Paul's text doesn't quite match up with Acts. From the narrative there, we might expect animosity from the local Jewish community, but Paul tells us that the opponents of the new Christians in Thessalonica are other Gentiles.
- The new Christians in Thessalonica seem to have assumed that if they converted, they would escape death. But some of those who had embraced Paul's new religion had since passed on, and it seemed as if they would not have a share in Christ's new kingdom after all. In his letter, Paul assures the Thessalonians that Christians who have died will enjoy equal blessings with believers who are still alive. When Christ comes again, deceased Christians will rise from their graves.
 - Paul explains that the righteous will be taken up from the earth and, thus, will avoid the destruction that God will pour out on the wicked.
 - This is the origin of the belief of some contemporary Christians in the rapture. But note that Paul assumes that Jesus's Second Coming will occur within the lifetime of himself and many of his original readers.
- Paul also mentions several doctrinal points: God had raised Jesus from the dead; the Holy Spirit will aid believers; prayer matters; Satan is trying to hinder the work; and Jesus will rescue believers from the "coming wrath" and will return again soon, after which Christians will be with the Lord forever.
- Note that there is nothing in the letter about atonement or forgiveness of sins, events from Jesus's life, moral instructions from the Sermon on the Mount, baptism, or the Eucharist. Paul never quotes from the Jewish scriptures, and he doesn't discuss the metaphysical nature of Christ. Instead, 1 Thessalonians seems to be

a document of an apocalyptic sect that was expecting the end times to arrive at any moment.

Other Pauline Letters

- Like 1 Thessalonians, the other letters of the New Testament offer evidence of early Christian beliefs and practices, but none was composed as a comprehensive introduction to the religion. And they are not always consistent in their viewpoints.
- After the book of Acts, there are nine Pauline letters addressed to various Christian communities, arranged by length, from longest to shortest. Then follow four letters from Paul to individuals, again in order of descending length.
- Romans lays out Paul's most extensive theological arguments. All humans are sinners, he says, and are subject to God's judgment, but they can be justified, or proclaimed righteous, through their faith in Christ. This process of reconciliation with God is available to both Jews and non-Jews, apart from the Law of Moses.
 - Paul then warns Gentile converts not to think themselves superior to the Jews; God will still be faithful to his promises to Israel.
 - Paul quotes liberally from the Jewish scriptures and provides careful, sophisticated arguments. For many, Romans represents the pinnacle of Christian theology.
- Paul's response to questions he had received on practical matters from the community at Corinth is found in 1 Corinthians. Paul stresses the need for unity, explains his authority as an apostle, and gives specific advice. He condemns those who use the gifts of the Spirit as occasions to look down on others, and he reaffirms the significance of the doctrine of resurrection in Christian theology.
- The book of 2 Corinthians has several jarring shifts of tone and topic; in fact, many scholars believe that it was originally two or more separate letters that were fused together. Paul goes from what

is essentially a travelogue to a defense of his ministry and a plea for reconciliation, to an appeal for donations to a fund for poor Christians in Jerusalem, to a denunciation of other missionaries.

- Galatians is Paul's angriest, most polemical letter. Apparently, the Christians at Galatia had been visited by other missionaries who told them that Gentile converts had to be circumcised, contrary to what Paul had preached and the decision of the Jerusalem Council.
- Philippians is a letter written by Paul from prison to strengthen the faith of Christians at Philippi, and Philemon is a short note written on behalf of a runaway slave, addressed to his Christian master.
- The seven letters discussed thus far are all regarded as authentic and were composed from 50 to 60 C.E., but scholars are divided about whether Colossians and 2 Thessalonians were written by Paul or a later disciple or admirer. There is broad consensus that Ephesians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus are from a later period, perhaps 80–110 C.E., and were attributed to Paul to increase their credibility.
- Hebrews is a sermon in the guise of a letter that explains Jesus's relationship to the Israelite priesthood, proclaiming Christ as the high priest who offered himself as the final sacrifice for sin. Hebrews relies heavily on allusions to Jewish scripture and ritual, and it explores the idea that faith provides insight into heavenly realities. It doesn't sound much like Paul, and even early church fathers doubted that it had been written by him.

General Epistles and Revelation

- The remainder of the New Testament consists of short letters attributed to James, Peter, John, and Jude and the book of Revelation. These letters are often referred to as "general epistles" because they seem to have been written to Christians in general rather than to specific congregations or individuals.
 - They take up such themes as proper Christian conduct, the dangers of false teachers, the seeming delay of Jesus's Second

Coming, and the centrality of love in Christian thought and action.

- The questions of when and by whom these documents were written are matters of debate, and indeed, there were disputes in the 2nd through 4th centuries about whether they should be included in the Christian canon, but most scholars today date them from the late 1st century to the beginning of the 2nd.
- Revelation is a work of apocalyptic literature, of which there were many examples, both Jewish and Christian, in the late Second Temple period and early centuries of the Common Era. Typically, these texts present a dualistic worldview, with sharp demarcations between the wicked majority and an oppressed minority of the righteous, who are looking for God to bring his wrathful judgment down upon their opponents.
- True to form, the book of Revelation presents itself as a series of visions and prophecies about the end times, when God will intervene directly to destroy the wicked and establish a new heaven and a new earth. There is a great deal of cryptic, sometimes violent imagery, with blood, trumpets, war, natural disasters, angels, and so on.
- The New Testament concludes with an urgent affirmation that this world is coming to an end. One might argue that a great deal of the New Testament was written as a response to what might seem to have been a failure on Jesus's part. The three Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as the Messiah, an anointed leader or liberator, who proclaimed that God's kingdom was close at hand, yet his death left the work unfinished. Jesus must be coming back at some point to usher in the new kingdom he had promised.
 - Paul and the Christians in Thessalonica expected his return momentarily, but when it looked as if the Second Coming might take some time, a more formal church organization developed.

- Some scholars have seen the Gospel of John as spiritualizing the concept of God's kingdom, at least to some extent, and 2 Peter, probably the last book written in the New Testament, suggests that human timetables aren't applicable to the Lord and that the delay is actually a manifestation of God's mercy; he's giving people more time to repent.

Conclusions about the New Testament

- The New Testament is an eclectic collection that Christians over the centuries have found inspiring, comforting, and motivating. In fact, perhaps part of what it means to be Christian is to continually read, interpret, apply, and argue over these texts.
- Some believers find the scholarly historical-critical method of scripture study somewhat threatening. When we look for contradictions and inconsistencies or judge sacred texts by the standards of science, archaeology, and literary scholarship, don't we diminish their authority? These are ultimately theological questions, but we can point to three observations that might be helpful in this regard.
 - Fundamentalism, like the historical-critical method, is a relatively new phenomenon. Ideas of biblical infallibility, inerrancy, and literalism themselves have a history and can be debated without overthrowing the whole religion.
 - The focal point of Christianity is a person, not a book, and although the New Testament is one of our primary means of understanding that person, there are others.
 - Finally, although it appears that there is a great deal of the human element in the sacred texts of Christianity, the New Testament never claimed to be an eternal text that had its origins in heaven. How could something human-made have ultimate significance? The religion itself offers a helpful analogy: Just as Jesus was considered in mainstream Christianity to have been both fully human and fully divine, so too, the New Testament

is regarded by believers as the product of both human effort and divine inspiration.

Suggested Reading

Brettler, Enns, and Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer*.

Dunn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*.

Gager, *Reinventing Paul*.

Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

Pagels, *Revelations*.

Sprong, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*.

Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why have letters played such a crucial role in Christian doctrines and history?
2. How much of Christian teaching has been shaped by Paul, and what other strands are there in traditions and texts from the early church?

Apocryphal Gospels

Lecture 28

Early Christians adopted the Jewish practice of reading selections from the Old Testament on the Sabbath, and those readings were eventually supplemented with excerpts from the Gospels and other New Testament writings, especially the letters of Paul. But in the centuries before there was an official, widely accepted New Testament, this presented a problem. There are many writings from the early centuries of Christianity that at least some believers thought of as scriptural but that were ultimately rejected by majority opinion. As we'll see in this lecture, some of these are quite different from those texts that eventually made their way into the New Testament.

The Gospel of Peter

- In 1886–1887, a French archaeological team was excavating some graves dating from the 8th to the 12th centuries in Akhmim in Upper Egypt. One grave, apparently of a Christian monk, contained a small parchment codex with excerpts from four noncanonical Christian writings, including the Gospel of Peter. The manuscript itself is probably from the 7th or 8th century, but the version of the gospel it contains appears to be one that was known in the 2nd century.
- We don't have the entire gospel, but what we have narrates Jesus's death and resurrection in much the same terms as the four canonical gospels, with some subtle variations and extra details.
 - Although it tends to put more blame on the Jews than on the Romans, it indicates that ordinary Jews began almost immediately to regret Jesus's execution (new information), and when their leaders heard this, they asked the Romans to post guards at the tomb. We even get the name of the officer in charge of the mission, Petronius.

- One of the new details that might have worried earlier Christians was this: “He held his peace, as if he felt no pain.” Did Jesus only seem to suffer?
- Perhaps most significantly, we get an account of the resurrection itself. The soldiers on guard saw two men—perhaps angels—descend from heaven. The stone sealing the tomb rolled away on its own, and the two went inside. Shortly thereafter, three men emerged, with the third being helped along by the others and followed by a cross. The three figures became enormous. A heavenly voice asked, “Have you preached to those who sleep?” (the dead), and the cross answered, “Yes.”

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas

- For a long time, Christians and historians alike believed that the church was established shortly after Jesus’s resurrection, and a series of heretical movements followed that challenged both orthodoxy and the authority of church leaders. Key points of contention in the 2nd century included the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, the role of ecstatic prophecy, and whether Jesus had given secret higher teachings to his closest disciples.
- The early church fathers described some of these ideas as deviations from orthodoxy; indeed, most of what we knew about these movements came from the writings of their opponents.
 - Starting in the latter half of the 19th century, however, archeologists began uncovering some of the texts written by those who had been branded as heretics, and it seems there was considerable confusion in the early centuries of the Common Era about the tenets of the faith.
 - Rather than a simple story of orthodoxy and heresy, it now appears that there were many different strains of early Christianity, all with their own traditions and sacred texts and all vying for position.

- What we think of as “orthodoxy” today was simply the winner in these theological disputes, and those ideas became truly dominant only with the church councils of the 4th century.
- Alongside the four gospels that were eventually accepted into the New Testament, there were competing accounts of Jesus’s life, such as the Gospel of Peter, that we now categorize as apocryphal (“hidden”) gospels. These texts often told very different stories, sometimes based on quite different notions of how Jesus could be both human and divine. One of the most famous of these apocryphal writings is the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.
- This gospel originated in the 2nd century and was once a popular work. It begins with a story of the five-year-old Jesus creating 12 sparrows out of mud, then commanding them to leave. Not long afterward, Jesus was walking through the village and another child ran into him. The young Jesus angrily said, “You will go no further on your way.” Because everything Jesus said came true, the other child fell down dead. The gospel contains several stories of miraculous healings or times when Jesus was smarter than his teachers or when he changed the order of nature to help out his parents.
- The Infancy Gospel of Thomas ends with the tale of Jesus being lost in Jerusalem when he was 12 and ending up in the temple (also found in Luke), but the familiar conclusion to the narrative—that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and grace”—feels somewhat different in the Infancy Gospel. There, Jesus is not presented as perfect from the beginning; we have seen him learn to control his supernatural powers and turn them to good ends.

The Gospel of Mary

- Some of the apocryphal gospels are today known only in a few fragments. For instance, we have only about nine manuscript pages from the Gospel of Mary, a 2nd-century text, written in Coptic, that was discovered in 1896 but not published until 1955.

- The first six pages are missing, and then we get some of Jesus's final teachings to his disciples before he ascended to heaven.
- As the disciples are mourning his departure, Mary (presumably Mary Magdalene) joins them, and Peter says, "We know that Jesus loved you more than the other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, which you know and we do not, since we did not hear them." Mary replies, "What is hidden from you I will tell you." She starts to report what the Lord had told her in a vision; then, four pages are missing.
- When the manuscript resumes, it seems that Mary is telling the disciples about how the soul ascends past seven powers or authorities: darkness, desire, ignorance, envy of death, the kingdom of the flesh, foolish wisdom of the flesh, and wrathful wisdom. One of those listening, Andrew, challenges Mary, saying he doesn't believe these are the words of the savior, but a paragraph or so later, the disciples accept Mary's words, and they begin to preach them widely.
- The Gospel of Mary wasn't accepted into the Christian canon, but it is an example of Gnostic Christianity, a form of the faith that competed with proto-orthodoxy in the early centuries.
 - Some of the general beliefs of the Gnostics included the notion that matter and spirit were opposed to each other, that this material world of evil had been created by a lesser god or demiurge, and that some people have within them a spark of the divine, imprisoned in a corruptible physical body.
 - Gnostics also believed that Jesus was a pure spiritual being who was sent by the highest God to teach them the special knowledge (*gnosis*) and ascetic practices that would lead to liberation from material existence.
- We began to understand Gnosticism much better after 1945, when a fieldworker near the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi found

a large clay jar sealed with bitumen. Inside were 13 codices bound in leather and written in the Coptic language.

- The 13 codices contained 52 separate works, mostly Gnostic texts. Although the physical books were dated to the 4th century, the writings they contained had been originally composed in Greek much earlier, then translated into Coptic.
- Among the Nag Hammadi texts were four that might be considered apocryphal gospels, including what is probably the most important example of the genre—the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas and the Didache

- When the Gospel of Thomas appeared in one of the Nag Hammadi codices, scholars recognized it from three Greek fragments that had been discovered in 1896 and 1903 in Egypt.
 - In 1896, a decade after the Gospel of Peter was found, two Oxford archaeologists discovered a series of garbage dumps associated with the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, about 100 miles south of Cairo.
 - Because Oxyrhynchus had been an administrative center, the trash included thousands of Greek and Latin papyri, discarded over the course of a nearly a millennium. Among the finds were some biblical fragments from both the Old and New Testaments and a few early noncanonical Christian writings, including some apocryphal gospels.
 - In the first year of excavation, a bit of papyrus was found containing seven sayings of Jesus; two similar fragments were discovered in 1903. The full significance of these fragments was not realized until the discovery of a complete Coptic translation of the Gospel of Thomas in the Nag Hammadi library 42 years later.
- Remarkably, the Gospel of Thomas does not include any stories about Jesus. Instead, there are 114 independent quotations, in seemingly random order, said to have been recorded by Thomas

Selections from the Gospel of Thomas

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.

(1) And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." (Lambdin, trans.)

(2) Jesus said: "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All." (Lambdin, trans.)

(3) Jesus said: "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves you will dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty." (Lambdin, trans.)

(19) Jesus said: "Blessed is that which existed before coming into being. If you exist as my disciples and listen to my sayings, these stones will minister unto you. Indeed, you have five trees in paradise, which do not move in summer or winter, and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever is acquainted with them will not taste death." (Layton, trans.)

(75) Jesus said: "There are many standing at the door, but it is the solitaires who will enter the bridal chamber." (Layton, trans.)

(77) Jesus said: "It is I who am the light upon them all. It is I who am the all. It is from me that the all has come, and to me that the all has extended. Split a piece of wood: I am there. Lift up a stone and you will find me there." (Ehrman, trans.)

(98) Jesus said: "What the kingdom of the father resembles is a man who wanted to assassinate a member of court. At home, he drew the dagger and stabbed it into the wall in order to know whether his hand would be firm. Next, he murdered the member of court." (Layton, trans.)

(114) "Simon Peter said to them, 'Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of the life.'" Jesus said, "Look, I am going to guide her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven." (Ehrman, trans.)

Didymus, Jesus's twin brother. The existence of a text containing nothing but quotations demonstrated the possibility that the hypothetical document called Q (the source for Matthew and Luke) might also exist, even though the Gospel of Thomas did not itself turn out to be Q.

- About half the sayings in Thomas are similar to those in the three Synoptic Gospels, but the wording is different enough that it doesn't seem as if the author was drawing from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The Gospel of Thomas appears to be an independent compilation of oral traditions about Jesus, dating from the late 1st or early 2nd century (about the time of the New Testament gospels), though hardly anyone believes that all these statements originated with Jesus himself.
- The quotations that are not in the New Testament are perhaps even more interesting. They seem to have a Gnostic flavor to them, focusing on secret wisdom and how knowledge of one's true nature can lead to eternal life. Many of the sayings seem puzzling to us today, but some early Christians regarded the Gospel of Thomas as an authoritative sacred text.
- In 1873, a document known as the Didache ("Teachings") was discovered in a monastery library in Constantinople. It was compiled about 100 C.E. and was accepted as scripture by many Christians in the 2nd to 4th centuries. This short work includes ethical teachings, guidance for fasting and prayer, and instructions for rituals and the Eucharist. Because the Didache wasn't attributed to a specific apostle, it didn't make it onto Athanasius's list of accepted scriptural texts in 367 C.E. and was gradually lost and forgotten.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

_____, ed., *Lost Scriptures*.

Ehrman and Pleše, trans., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*.

Foster, *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction*.

Layton, trans., *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

Pagles, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

———, *Beyond Belief*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the criteria by which early church fathers decided which writings should be included in the New Testament, and what were some of the texts that didn't make the cut?
2. How do apocryphal gospels differ from the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? What makes the Gospel of Thomas special?

Related Traditions—Mormon Scriptures

Lecture 29

The story behind the transcription of the Book of Mormon is an interesting one, with Joseph Smith digging up gold plates from a hillside in upstate New York after seeing a divine messenger. In terms of number of believers and global reach, the Book of Mormon is one of the most successful scriptures of the last few centuries. It is unusual as a sacred text in that it offers a sustained, integrated narrative, rather than a collection of poems or assorted commandments and doctrines revealed to a religious founder. It is also distinctive in that it preceded a religious movement rather than resulting from one, and it was canonical from the moment it first appeared in print.

Overview of Mormon Scriptures

- Mormonism began in upstate New York in March 1830 with the publication of the Book of Mormon. Eleven days later, a church was formally organized by Joseph Smith that came to be known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Today, this denomination, headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, has more than 15 million members worldwide.
- Despite the fact that Jesus Christ features prominently in the church's official name, Latter-day Saints have often been regarded as being outside the family of Christian denominations, in part because Christianity is so closely associated with a closed canon of scripture. Disagreements about which sacred texts should be authoritative are often religious boundary markers.
 - The fact that Mormonism has scriptures in addition to the Bible leads some to see it as a distinct religion rather than just a doctrinally creative sect of Christianity.
 - Mormons give full canonical authority to the Bible, yet they interpret it in terms of their unique additional scriptures: the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants, consisting

primarily of revelations given to Joseph Smith; and the Pearl of Great Price, a relatively short work that contains some of Smith's lesser-known writings, including excerpts from his inspired revision of the Bible, selections from an autobiographical essay, and a translation of Egyptian papyri from mummies that had come into his possession.

- The Doctrine and Covenants, divided into 138 chapter-like sections, is fairly typical of the sacred texts of new religious movements. It contains revelations given to the founder that were edited and revised by Smith and his successors over several decades. The contents are eclectic, including prophecies, commandments, scriptural exegesis, doctrinal exposition, and instructions for church organization, as well as advice and comfort for Mormon emigrants. Appended to the end of the book are two official declarations—one ending the practice of polygamy in 1890 and the other rescinding the priesthood ban for black members in 1978.
- Latter-day Saints assert that they have four “standard works” (their parlance for sacred texts), but actually, they have five. The fifth, rather unusually, is oral rather than written scripture; it is the text of their temple ceremony.
 - As you recall, the Hindu Brahmins resisted putting the Vedas into written form for a long time, because they believed that doing so would make the holy words common and accessible to all. It was important that the Vedas be internalized through memorization and that they were passed on directly from those who had already mastered their meanings; they needed to be spoken aloud, in specific ritual contexts, in order to actualize their sacred power.
 - This is similar to the way that Mormons feel about the temple ceremony, or endowment. This is a sort of initiation rite that portrays the creation of the world and the fall of Adam and Eve in a scripted drama, along with covenants and blessings directed toward individual believers. The text of the endowment ceremony was, for the most part, composed by Brigham Young

based on an outline and key elements that had been entrusted to him by Joseph Smith.

- Most Latter-day Saints encounter the words of the ceremony only orally, as it is performed. Although many Latter-day Saints have the script memorized, the words are considered so sacred that Mormons are forbidden from repeating them outside the temple or even discussing the details of the endowment.



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Mormon chapels feature Protestant-style Sunday services that are open to all, but admittance to their temples is granted only to adult Latter-day Saints who meet strict standards of worthiness and faithfulness.

The Book of Mormon

- The primary sacred text of Mormonism is the Book of Mormon. This scripture claims to be a translation of an ancient record from the Americas, recounting the 1,000-year history of a society transplanted from Judea to the New World.
- The book begins about 600 B.C.E., when a Jewish prophet named Lehi was warned by God to take his family and flee from Jerusalem shortly before the Babylonian Conquest. Lehi and his family wandered in the desert for eight years, then were commanded by God to build a boat and sail to America.
 - Lehi and his son Nephi continued to receive divine revelations, including the news that a Messiah, Jesus Christ, would someday be born in Israel and would atone for the sins of the world. Those who accepted this novel doctrine became known as Nephites, while their unbelieving relatives were called Lamanites.

- The Book of Mormon tells of the interactions between these two peoples, along with another group who had also emigrated from Jerusalem with a member of the royal house of David in tow.
- There is a long succession of wars, political intrigues, missionary efforts, sermons, and confrontations with religious dissenters, punctuated by miracles and revelations. We also read lengthy discussions of the destiny of the house of Israel, covenants, prophecy, sin, repentance, and Christian ethics, all within the context of a sweeping historical narrative.
- About halfway through the book, escalating military conflicts lead to a breakdown of the social order. After natural disasters wreak havoc on a wicked society, the few who had remained faithful to the Nephite prophecies are vindicated by the coming of the resurrected Jesus to the Americas.
- Jesus establishes a church, heals the sick, blesses children, teaches a version of the Sermon on the Mount, and prophesies of relations between Jews and Gentiles in the last days.
- After a couple centuries of peace and prosperity, old antagonisms resurface, eventually leading to a war of extermination. The Nephites are destroyed by the Lamanites about 400 C.E., and the Christian traditions of the New World are lost, aside from this single record, which was buried by the last of the Nephites, the prophet Moroni, who would later appear to Joseph Smith as an angel.
- Aside from the first chapters, which take place in the vicinity of Jerusalem and for which there perhaps is some archaeological evidence, there are no artifacts from the New World that decisively support Joseph's tale of Nephites and Lamanites.
 - Early believers regarded the Book of Mormon as the story of the origins of the American Indians, who would have been descended from the Lamanites; however, more recent LDS interpretations see the events of the Book of Mormon as taking

place in a much more limited geographical area (perhaps in Central America), with the Lamanites being absorbed into much larger Native American populations that immigrated across the Bering Strait.

- Historicity matters to most Mormons, in part because Smith's claims of gold plates made by ancient prophets seem to require some actual historical basis, and because a work of inspired fiction or imaginative inspiration would not have the same moral authority or urgency. Yet Mormons are generally not consumed by questions of archaeological support; they assume that such evidence will someday appear.
- Whether regarded as fact or fiction, the Book of Mormon is something of an anomaly in recent world scripture in that it consists of a coherent, integrated narrative.
 - The first quarter of the book includes first-person accounts from Nephi and his brother Jacob in the 6th century B.C.E. These pages, then, are revealed to be a document that was appended by Mormon, writing in the 4th century C.E., to a general history of Nephite civilization. The last 60 pages or so consist of additions made by Mormon's son, Moroni.
 - The various incidents, conversations, speeches, and doctrinal expositions that make up the Book of Mormon are all presented as having been composed and edited by Nephite narrators, who are themselves characters in the story. Thus, there are several layers of possible interpretation; we can track the motives and editorial styles of the various narrators and see how they are depicted as interacting with their source materials.
 - The stories can be rather complicated, with flashbacks, parallel narratives, embedded documents, and multiple voices, but for those with the patience to read closely, the chronologies, geographical references, and genealogical relationships are quite consistent—which is remarkable for a text that was dictated orally at one time.

Influence of the Book of Mormon

- Early Latter-day Saints tended to preach from the Bible rather than the Book of Mormon, probably because they knew the Bible better and because they thought that biblically based arguments would be more persuasive to their listeners. In the late 20th century, however, the Book of Mormon became a central component of the religion's education and worship.
- LDS liturgy has been influenced by the Book of Mormon in that the weekly Eucharist prayers are borrowed from that text and in a few hymns celebrating its coming forth, but there are no formal scripture readings in Mormon services analogous to those in other Christian or Jewish denominations, and there are no LDS holidays or churchwide commemorations based on the Book of Mormon.
- Although Mormons read the book for eternal truths and to discern God's will for them, recent scholars have seen the text as an important document in American religious history and a rich source for understanding Joseph Smith and the religious movement he founded.
 - The editor/prophets Mormon and Moroni were explicitly writing for a future audience, and their enumeration of the sins of modern America—pride, social inequality, skepticism, secret societies, rejection of prophecy and spiritual gifts, and religion as a money-making enterprise—offers insights into the religious and political tensions of Joseph Smith's day.
 - As literature, the Book of Mormon represents an interesting example of rhetoric and narrative technique in the early national period. Theologically, it responds to ambiguities and gaps in the Bible, providing an alternative to Protestant interpretations of Paul and renegotiating the boundaries between the Old and New Testaments. Nephite prophets testify to the enduring nature of God's promises to Israel, vigorously denying any hint of supersessionism.

- Perhaps most importantly, the Book of Mormon challenges the uniqueness of the Bible. One of its main messages is that God has spoken to many peoples around the world at various times in history. In short, Mormonism does to the Christian Bible what Christianity did to the Jewish scriptures; it expands the canon and, in so doing, offers a broader perspective from which to reinterpret the familiar words.

Suggested Reading

Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*.

Bowman, *The Mormon People*.

Bushman, *Joseph Smith*.

———, *Mormonism*.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price*.

Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*.

Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*.

Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*.

Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*.

———, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*.

Questions to Consider

1. What elements of the Book of Mormon make it a distinct addition to the library of recent world scriptures?
2. Does it make a difference that the Book of Mormon gave rise to a religious community, rather than the much more common pattern of a religious movement developing canonical scriptures over time?

Islam and Scriptural Recitation

Lecture 30

In 1352, Ibn Battuta, a native of Morocco, arrived in the West African empire of Mali, where he was impressed by the eagerness of his fellow Muslims to memorize the Qur'an. It's interesting to note that even in the 14th century, Islam was a universal religion that had crossed geographic and ethnic boundaries. (Today, it has some 1.6 billion adherents.) Memorizing the Qur'an has long been a celebrated act of devotion; even today, every year during the month of Ramadan, more than 100 students from 70 countries compete in a memorization contest in Cairo. In this lecture, we'll discuss Muhammad, the Qur'an, and attitudes of Muslims toward this sacred scripture.

Muhammad and the Rise of Islam

- Muhammad was born about 570 C.E. in Mecca, a trading town in Arabia that was the site of an ancient shrine called the Ka'ba, said to have been built by Abraham but at that time housing images of hundreds of gods. After being orphaned at a young age, Muhammad worked in the caravan trade and eventually married his boss, an older widow named Khadijah. This gave him a measure of prominence and security, though he still felt spiritual yearnings and would regularly retreat to a cave in the hills outside of Mecca to pray and meditate.
- On one such occasion, when he was 40 years old, Muhammad heard a voice commanding, "Recite." "Recite what?" he asked. The terrifying command was repeated twice more, and then the words came to him. With the verses etched into his memory, Muhammad came down from the hills and saw the angel Gabriel, who told Muhammad that he was the messenger of God. Afraid that he might be losing his mind, Muhammad went home to Khadijah, who told him she thought that his revelation was from God.

- The words continued to come: affirmations of the power and mercy of the one God, denunciations of idolatry and evil doing, warnings of the last judgment, commandments to live uprightly and treat others with kindness. After three years, Muhammad began to share these revelations with people outside his family, and he gradually gained a following.
- Trouble and persecution came when his preaching of monotheism threatened the livelihood of those who depended on the Ka'ba to bring religious pilgrims to Mecca; thus, when a delegation arrived in 622 from Medina, a town 250 miles to the northeast, inviting Muhammad to come and settle a dispute between clans, he jumped at the chance. His move from Mecca to Medina, now referred to as the Hijra, is the pivot of the Muslim calendar. Years are designated either B.H. or A.H.
- Muhammad became the spiritual and political leader of the community in Medina, and when conflict eventually broke into fighting with Mecca, Muhammad and his forces captured that city in 630; the Prophet lived there for the next two years until his death. His successors—not prophets but caliphs (“successors”)—continued to expand the realm of Islam militarily. From 632 to 661, under the first four caliphs, Muslim armies conquered Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia.
- A year after Muhammad’s death, a battle took place in which many of the original reciters of his words were killed. As a result, the first caliph, Abu Bakr, ordered the collection of all the revelations that had come to Muhammad in the 23 years from his first encounter with the angel Gabriel until his death. Around 650, under the third caliph, Uthman, these revelations were put into the standard form of 114 suras of the current Qur’an, and divergent copies were destroyed.
- Uthman’s Qur’an was something like the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible; it presented the word of God in a fixed form, right down to mysterious, disconnected Arabic letters that appear at

the beginning of 29 suras. Most Muslims, however, believe that the Qur'an was not the product of human editing; rather, it came through an inspired process that re-created the Qur'an that existed in heaven before it was revealed to Muhammad.

- After the assassination of the fourth caliph, 'Ali, who was Muhammad's son-in-law, the Muslim community split.
 - The majority followed the lead of the Umayyad clan, who established a powerful empire that lasted from 661 to 750 and expanded the realm of Islam to North Africa and Spain. These were the Sunni Muslims. Others, however, believed that the leadership of Islam should stay within the Prophet Muhammad's family line. These became known as Shia Muslims.
 - Today, about 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 15 percent are Shia. There are, however, a few countries, such as Iran and Iraq, where the Shia are in the majority.
- All Muslims, whether Sunni or Shia, hold to the Five Pillars: (1) the confession of faith ("There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet"), (2) prayer five times a day facing Mecca, (3) fasting during daylight hours for the month of Ramadan, (4) charitable giving to the poor and needy, and (5) pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, if possible. In addition, the Qur'an is revered by all Muslims; thus, it serves as a sort of foundation for the Five Pillars.

Significance of the Qur'an

- The Qur'an is what we might call "postcanonical scripture." That is, Muhammad was well aware that Jews and Christians had sacred texts that had already been in circulation for centuries, which they claimed had come from the one God. What was the point of yet another book of scripture? What made the Qur'an different from, and superior to, the Bible?
- The first difference is that Muslims believe the Qur'an came by direct revelation. Jews had long accepted the Torah as revelation to

Moses, but much of the rest of the Tanakh seemed to be the work of inspired poets, historians, and editors. The Hebrew Bible is the story of a relationship—the relationship of God and Israel; it isn't a transcript of God's utterances. And the New Testament is even farther removed—the gospels are collections of stories about Jesus, and the epistles are letters, written by Paul or John, not by God.

- A second difference between the Bible and the Qur'an is that the latter is regarded by Muslims as the complete and final revelation of God. One of the major themes in the Qur'an is that God had sent earlier prophets to humankind, but their words had been ignored or distorted.
 - Four special messengers received heavenly books: the Scrolls was revealed to Abraham; Moses received the Torah; David, the Psalms; and Jesus, the Gospel (a book actually written down by Jesus himself, not the four gospels of the New Testament), but all of these were lost, corrupted, or misinterpreted.
 - God gave the Qur'an to Muhammad as a corrective, a perfect text that could resolve all confusion and teach the truth clearly. This is the last word that would ever be needed; thus, Muhammad was the “seal of the prophets”—the final prophet and authenticator of all his predecessors.
- A third unique aspect of the Qur'an, again, according to Muslims, is the perfect beauty of its language. It is written in a rhythmic form of Arabic, with a great deal of alliteration, assonance, and end rhymes. In the centuries following Muhammad, Islamic thinkers developed the concept of the “inimitability” of the Qur'an, though the seeds of the idea are within the text itself.
- At a time when many believed that God's messengers could be identified by the miracles they performed, Muslims held up the Qur'an as Muhammad's greatest miracle, especially given that he was thought to have been illiterate or, at least, unacquainted with books. The elevated style and content of the Qur'an constitute a sign of its truth.



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In a religion that strictly forbids graven images, calligraphy is a prestigious form of art; mosques are often decorated with Qur'anic calligraphy.

Reverence for the Qur'an

- Because the language of the Qur'an is inseparable from its content and because both come directly from God, a translation of the Qur'an is not the real Qur'an. For that matter, the real Qur'an is not the lines written on a page but, rather, the words as they are spoken and heard. The Qur'an as a book is merely an aid to memorization or recitation.
- In Muslim countries, the sounds of the Qur'an are everywhere, particularly given that the recitation of the Qur'an is a sophisticated and esteemed art form. The sacred words can be heard not only in mosques but on radio and television, in taxicabs and concert halls, and at weddings, festivals, and funerals.
- There are two basic forms of Quranic recitation: one with strict rules for ordinary study and practice and the other more freeform, featuring a great deal of melodic modulation and technical artistry, performed by trained experts.
- Memorizing, reciting, and listening to the Qur'an are ways of communing with God in a bodily fashion, perhaps something like taking the Eucharist in the Christian faith. But it's not just a Sunday

or a seasonal thing. There is no tradition of separating church and state in Islam; thus, the Qur'an infuses everyday life, even in aspects that would seem political or secular to Westerners.

- And even though the Qur'an as a physical object is just a shadow of the true aural Qur'an, it is nevertheless a sacred object. It is kept apart from other books, with nothing placed on top of it. Many Muslims wash their hands before reading the Qur'an, and it is usually referred to not just as "the Qur'an" but as "the Glorious Qur'an" or "the Noble Qur'an."
 - The respect shown for the Qur'an may not be quite like that of the Sikhs for the Adi Granth, because Muslims do not treat the Qur'an as a living guru, yet it is higher than that shown for the Bible, which is widely distributed in hundreds of languages and is, at least as a physical object, regarded as a regular book.
 - Further, the primacy of the spoken or chanted version of scripture is familiar from Hinduism, but unlike the Sanskrit of the Vedas, Arabic is still a living language, and the meaning of the Qur'an matters enormously to believers.

Suggested Reading

Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*.

Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an*.

Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture*.

Nigosian, *Islam*.

Ruthven, *Islam in the World*.

Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the relationship between Islam and the Qur'an differ from that of Christianity and the Bible?
2. Why is the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an (in its original Arabic!) so crucial to Muslim faith?

Holy Qur'an

Lecture 31

Outsiders coming to new holy books often read them superficially, or they bring assumptions about what “scripture” should sound like, both of which can make it difficult to understand what believers see in their own sacred texts. Even today, many readers are tempted to approach a sacred text with the question: Is the religion portrayed here good or bad? It’s possible to peruse the Qur’an looking for evidence that Islam is a violent religion, or incompatible with democracy, or discriminatory toward women. But a more thoughtful exercise is to try to identify the major themes that the Qur’an puts forward, particularly in their original context of 7th-century Arabia.

Basic Themes of the Qur'an

- As we noted in our last lecture, the Qur'an is thought by Muslims to be a direct revelation from God. God is, in fact, the main speaker throughout, referring to himself in the first person and, occasionally, in the third person. Muhammad's voice is also heard, but it's usually prefaced by the command “Say” from God.
- There is no large narrative structure in the Qur'an, as there is in the Bible or the Hindu epics. The 114 suras are individual units, and they are not arranged in the order that Muhammad received them. Instead, they are organized roughly by decreasing length. The longest, sura 2, has 286 verses, while the shortest suras (103, 108, 110) have just 3 verses apiece. Every sura except 9 begins with the invocation “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.”
- The earlier, shorter suras from the Meccan period tend to be more focused and lyrical, while the longer suras, received at Medina, are more prosaic and can jump from topic to topic. Each sura has a traditional name derived from its main theme, its first word, or some unique topic or term. Hence, the second sura is called “The Cow,” even though only 6 of its 286 verses discuss the sacrifice of a heifer by the ancient Israelites.

- The first sura in the Qur'an, called "The Opening," encapsulates the message of Islam in just seven verses. It is recited by Muslims multiple times each day as part of the five obligatory prayers and conveys the news that Muhammad brought to the world: that there is but one God, who is both just and merciful; human beings should worship him alone; and they should surrender themselves to him by following the path he has established. God will help those who call upon him, but those who reject God will incur his wrath now and at the day of judgment.
 - Muslims have long classified suras as belonging either to the Meccan period (i.e., before the Hijra in 622) or the Medinan period. It is not always obvious which suras are which, and indeed, some passages within the same sura may have been revealed in different locations.
 - The consensus is that "The Opening" was received in Mecca, and its emphasis on strict monotheism would have been revolutionary among the Bedouin tribes.
- Another startling teaching was the Qur'an's insistence on the resurrection. According to sura 45, Arabs at the time did not believe in any kind of life after death, but the angel Gabriel brought to Muhammad the sura on resurrection (75). The sura concludes with the question of whether it is harder to believe in resurrection than in creation. If God created men and women, then surely, he could reassemble them after death.

Bible Stories in the Qur'an

- The earliest suras are short and lyrical, often using formulaic oaths to praise God's majesty and mercy. But eventually, the revelations to Muhammad began to refer to past events, to earlier prophets that God had sent and what happened to those who ignored their warnings. There are also retellings of biblical stories, though the emphasis is on the meaning of events rather than narration of them. The Qur'an assumes that its hearers are already familiar with the stories, and it often adds dialogue and details that are not in the Bible.

- For instance, sura 20 tells the story of Moses in Egypt, but the parting of the Red Sea gets just two verses; what matters is not so much the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage as the confrontation between Moses and the unbelieving Egyptians at the pharaoh's court.
- In sura 71, God tells Noah to warn the people and give them a chance to repent before he sends the flood. That episode is not in the Bible, nor is the observation that when Noah preached, people stuck their fingers in their ears so they couldn't hear him.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, is mentioned frequently in the Qur'an, with nonbiblical details about her birth and early years. In addition, the Qur'an has a story about Jesus making birds out of clay and bringing them to life that is also found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.
- Scholars are often interested in tracking Muhammad's sources in the Bible or in Jewish and Christian traditions that were circulating in Arabia in the 7th century. Most Muslims, though, view God himself as Muhammad's sole source, and if there are similarities with what's in the Bible, it's because God was behind that book, as well.
- The relationship between the Bible and the Qur'an is not like that of the Old and New Testaments. Christians adopted the Hebrew Bible and consider it authoritative, even if some parts have been updated or made obsolete by the revelation in Christ. In contrast, Muslims regard the Bible as corrupted with additions and interpolations, such as the idea of God as a father, the Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the divinity of Christ, or the Trinity. The Qur'an is a replacement for the Bible; it's God's final and complete word.
- In general, the Qur'an warns the world about the evils of polytheism and idolatry and about the need to turn to God and keep his commandments before the coming day of judgment, but a few passages give special attention to Jews and Christians.

- It appears that early on, Muhammad viewed Jews as natural allies and potential converts; after all, they, too, were monotheists and believed in prophets sent by God. Many of the early references to Jews in the Qur'an are rather positive. Yet when Jews didn't convert as expected and after religious and even military confrontations, the Qur'an has a few strong words of condemnation.
- Nevertheless, for most of history, Muslims and Jews seemed to get along fairly well, at least by the standards of premodern societies and certainly better than Christians and Jews. Despite some tensions between the two communities, the Qur'an famously enjoins, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:257).

Islamic Laws

- After Muhammad became both the political and the religious leader in Medina, he received revelations having to do with laws and regulations. These later, longer, more prosaic suras, which appear toward the beginning of the Qur'an, address such topics as gambling, marriage, inheritance, infanticide, property rights, criminal law, the rights of orphans, and so forth.
- Sura 2, "The Cow," is a good example. Indeed, it is sometimes regarded as the Qur'an in miniature because it reiterates so many of the principles found elsewhere in the scripture. In relatively short passages, it moves through the topics of faith and disbelief; the creation, Adam, and Satan; Bible stories of Moses, the Israelites, and Jesus; polemics against Jews and Christians; Islamic practices and regulations; and more.
- Non-Muslims might assume that the Qur'an is something of a jumble, but Muslims see little distinction between sacred and secular matters in a life that is entirely devoted to God, and they regard it as a sign of God's grace that the basic message of Islam is spread throughout the Qur'an. You can't read more than a few pages without encountering references to the one God, his

Selections from the Qur'an

Sura 1 ("The Opening"):

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, the Master of the Day of Doom. Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour. Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray. (Arberry, trans.)

Sura 75 ("The Resurrection"):

Yes indeed! I swear by the Day of Resurrection! Yes indeed! I swear by the soul that remonstrates! Does man imagine We shall not reassemble his bones? Indeed. We can reshape his very fingers! In truth, man wishes to persist in his debauchery; He asks when the Day of Resurrection shall come. When eyes are dazzled, and the moon is eclipsed, and sun and moon are joined together, Man that Day shall ask: "Where to escape?" No, there is no refuge! (Khalidi, trans.)

Sura 82 ("The Splitting"):

When heaven is split open, when the stars are scattered, when the seas swarm over, when the tombs are overthrown, then a soul shall know its works, the former and the latter. O Man! What deceived thee as to thy generous Lord who created thee and shaped thee and wrought thee in symmetry and composed thee after what form He would? (Arberry, trans.)

Sura 24 ("Verse of Light"):

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of his light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp; the lamp enclosed in glass. The glass as it were a brilliant star, lit for a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it. Light upon light! God doth guide whom he will to his light. God doth set forth parables for men, and God doth know all things. (Ali, trans.)

outreach to humankind, the straight path that he has set, and the coming judgment.

- Much attention has been given to laws in the Qur'an regarding women. There are several that seem discriminatory by modern standards: Men are allowed to have up to four wives, and a daughter receives only half the inheritance of a son. Yet in the context of 7th-century Arabia, much of what the Qur'an teaches would have been regarded as progressive. Women had some inheritance rights, they were granted protections in divorce proceedings, and they were entitled to control of their own property, even if they were married.
 - In addition, the Qur'an strenuously condemned the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide and made it clear that women and men are equal in their relationship with God.
 - Many of the traditions that we today associate with Islam arose after the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, the Qur'an urges both women and men to be modest, and it nowhere explicitly requires that women cover their heads or faces. The practice of veiling is more culture-specific; full veiling is rather rare, and most Muslim women live in countries where they can choose whether or not to wear a head scarf (hijab).
 - Keep in mind, too, that Muslim women have, at some point, been elected to lead the three most populous Muslim countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.
- Such laws and practices, of course, raise the question of interpretation. If all Muslims follow the Qur'an, how can they practice it differently in different countries? Who determines the rules?
 - Consider, for example, the Qur'anic allowance of polygamy. Some have pointed out that polygamy was common in ancient societies, and limiting wives to four is better than no limits at all. Others, however, have noted a subtle discouragement of polygamy in the Qur'an (sura 4:129). At any rate, polygamous unions make up only 1 to 3 percent of Muslim

marriages today, and most Muslims live in countries where such marriages are restricted.

- In general, women are treated with respect in the Qur'an, though they are not treated equally to men. It's up to Muslims themselves to decide how best to interpret their sacred text, but the dilemma of how to implement the principles of an ancient document in the modern world is not unique to Islam.
- Most Muslims believe that reading and reciting the Qur'an has enriched their lives and made them better people—kinder, more moral, and closer to God. It is a custom among some Muslims to say this prayer after completing a recitation of the Qur'an: "O God, make the Qur'an a mercy for me, and set it for me as a model, a light, a guidance and a mercy" (Nigosian, 75). That seems like a noble sentiment.

Suggested Reading

Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: A New Translation*.

Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary*.

Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*.

Khalidi, trans., *The Qur'an*.

Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography*.

Rippin, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*.

Saeed, *The Qur'an*.

Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an*.

Siddiqui, *How to Read the Qur'an*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the earlier revelations that Muhammad received at Mecca differ from those received at Medina?
2. What are the strong religious claims that the Qur'an makes concerning its origins and significance? Why is it such a self-referential text?

Hadith and Sufism

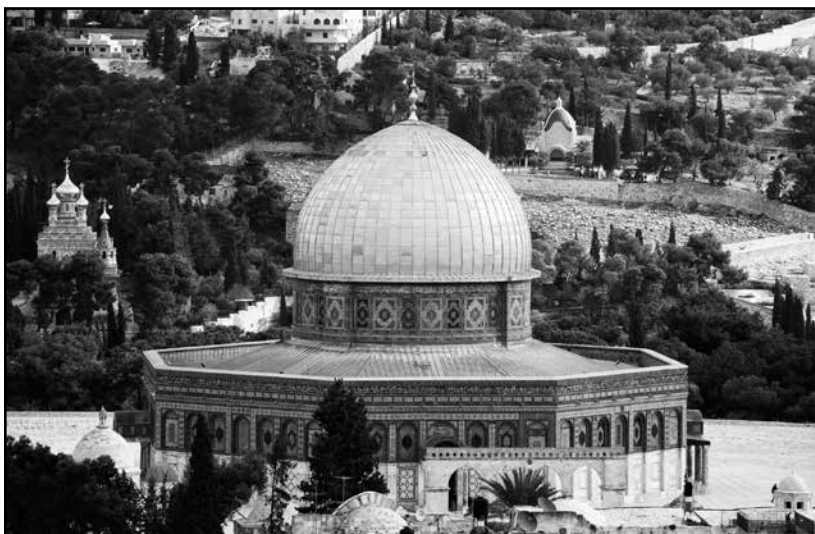
Lecture 32

Two primary ways that Muslims have responded to the message of the Qur'an are through legal interpretation based on the Hadith and the mystical movement of Sufism. One interpretive path that Muslims have generally not taken is that of the historical-critical method. Thus, to address some variants in the Qur'anic texts, commentators developed the idea of abrogation—that some of the commandments from God had only temporary application, and those could be superseded by later revelations. A greater challenge than apparent contradictions was the sparseness of the Qur'an; it doesn't provide enough details for regulating a complex society. For help here, Muslims turned to the Hadith.

Hadith: Stories of the Prophet

- Unlike Jesus, Muhammad was never considered absolutely sinless, but he was nevertheless held up as a model of integrity and good conduct. Believers naturally wanted to follow his example, even in things that might seem relatively minor. There are literally thousands of anecdotes concerning the behavior of the Prophet, and they provide a lens through which to interpret the Qur'an.
- For believers who want to know about Muhammad's life, the Qur'an can be frustrating; it doesn't have much in the way of biography. God speaks to his messenger throughout, but Muhammad's name occurs only four times, and incidents in his life are referred to rather than recounted. It is only in the Hadith—some of which are rather lengthy—that we learn about his marriages, his political leadership, or his night journey.
- In the first couple of centuries after Muhammad, these stories proliferated wildly, and there was a suspicion that many of them might be fraudulent. For this reason, scholars began to collect and evaluate them in systematic ways. A Hadith came to have two parts: the *isnad*, or chain of sources, and the *matn*, or the story itself.

- One of the early collectors of Hadith, the 9th-century Persian scholar al-Bukhari, is said to have traveled all over the Middle East in search of stories about the Prophet.
 - He interviewed 1,000 experts and heard some 600,000 Hadith (many of them variants of one another). Of these, he memorized 200,000 and finally came up with just 2,700 that he thought were unquestionably authentic.
 - Bukhari published his collection in 97 sections, each devoted to a particular topic, such as faith, prayer, festivals, alms, sales, loans, gifts, war, marriage, and good manners, as well as Muhammad's comments on specific suras from the Qur'an.
 - Bukhari's collection is highly regarded by Sunni Muslims. (The word *Sunna* means "well-trodden path," and it refers to the example set by Muhammad.) Shia Muslims have different opinions about the reliability of early witnesses and have their own collections of Hadith. The term *Shia* means "faction" or



The Dome of the Rock, or perhaps the Al-Aqsa Mosque next door, is thought to be the starting point for Muhammad's ascent to heaven.

“party,” and they are the 15 percent or so who believe that the leadership of Islam should have stayed within the Prophet’s family line.

- The Hadith are accepted as religiously authoritative, but they are not scripture in the same sense as the Qur’an. The Hadith are accounts of Muhammad’s actions and sayings, but the Qur’an is the direct revelation of God’s words; thus, the Hadith are never recited or used in worship. The relationship of Hadith to Qur’an is somewhat like Talmud to Torah. Both the Hadith and the Talmud are large collections of oral traditions that are intensely studied to determine rules and regulations for believers. However, the various Talmuds are records of legal debates, while the Hadith are raw materials for legal opinions.

Sharia

- Both Judaism and Islam have relatively small, closed canons, but the second tier of sacred literature is vast. Eventually, the analysis of Qur’an and Hadith produced Sharia, or Muslim law (“a path to be followed” or “the way”), yet this is not a single law code—it’s more of an ideal for a devout Muslim life—and the exact regulations are different in different countries.
- Islam has no hereditary or ordained priesthood; instead, leadership in the community comes from legal scholars who are expert in Sharia. Eventually, there arose four major schools of Islamic law. When faced with new situations or difficult cases, these scholars (*ulama*) would consult the Qur’an, the Hadith, and traditional interpretations of the Qur’an known as *tafsir*. From these sources—and applying the typical types of reasoning associated with one of the four legal schools—a correct judgment could be made.
 - For instance, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the 1979 revolution in Iran and governed the country until his death, first came to prominence as an Islamic legal scholar.
 - In 1984, a translation of 3,000 of his rulings on everyday life was published, called *A Clarification of Questions*. This work

addressed such topics as flossing, artificial insemination, and organ donation.

Sufism

- The mystic strand of Islam, called Sufism, which developed in the 8th century, sought to experience God directly, by giving oneself entirely to him and, in return, being enveloped in his love. Early Sufis were often ascetics who gained a reputation for purity and used music, dancing, poetry, meditation, ecstatic trances, and recitation of the names of God as spiritual practices.
- In centuries when Islamic law was closely connected with the government and sometimes corrupt rulers, Sufi mystics gained popular followings and were crucial in the spread of Islam to Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Eventually, Sufis were organized into various orders or brotherhoods.
- Because Sufis emphasized the spiritual, emotive aspects of religion rather than the letter of the law, they were sometimes regarded as suspect by conservative authorities. Nevertheless, Sufi ideas and sensibilities are widespread throughout Islam, particularly in Shia communities. Sufis themselves stressed the importance of studying with a recognized master (something like Zen Buddhists), and they often emphasized the need to keep Sharia law as the basis for more advanced spiritual practices.
- Sufism is also popular in the West among non-Muslims, in part because of its sensuous allegorical love poetry and its willingness to overlook doctrinal differences in the belief that many paths lead to God, though whether Sufism can be separated from the Islamic profession of faith is an open question. The situation is somewhat similar to the way that Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama are regarded in the West, where they have a prominence out of proportion to their actual role in the tradition.
- The Qur'an and the Hadith are foundational sacred texts for all Muslims, just as the Tanakh and the Talmud are foundational for

Jews. Yet Sufism, as an esoteric strand in the tradition, is probably more widespread in Islam than comparable forms of Jewish and Christian mysticism.

Celebrated Sufi Authors

- Even though Sufi classics are not scripture and are more highly regarded in some places than in others, Westerners studying Islam are likely to encounter some of them. Two of the most celebrated Sufi authors are Attar and Rumi, whose poetry has become an integral part of Iranian national literature.
- Farid al-Din Attar (1145–1221) was from Nishapur in northeast Iran. Attar penned a prose account of the lives and miracles of Sufi mystics called *Memorial of God's Friends*, which is somewhat reminiscent of the tales of Zen masters. His most important work is *The Conference of the Birds*, a long allegorical poem about a group of birds who journey in search of a mythic bird king. The allegory points toward the various excuses people give for not seeking God, and each bird represents a human weakness. Throughout their journey, about 100 stories or parables are told.
 - Of course, Sufis, like other Muslims, looked to the Qur'an for guidance, but they often practiced a type of allegorical interpretation called *ta'wil*, which sought for deeper, hidden meanings, in contrast to the plain sense and close readings of *tafsir* commentaries.
 - We can see an example in *The Conference of the Birds*, where Attar suggests that, like Adam leaving paradise, “The man whose mind and vision are ensnared by heaven's grace must forfeit that same grace, for only then can he direct his face to his true Lord” (40). Apparently, being too blessed, or even too religious, can sometimes hinder spiritual progress.
- Jalal al-din Rumi (1207–1273) is even more famous than Attar. Born in Afghanistan, his family migrated to Turkey, where he became a Sufi and a prolific poet, writing thousands of verses. He was also the founder of the Mevlevi order of Sufis, popularly known

as “whirling dervishes” for their distinctive devotional dancing. His masterpiece is the *Mathnawi*, an anthology of didactic poetry in six books, with about 25,000 rhyming couplets in all.

- The *Mathnawi* retells stories from the Qur’an, the Hadith, the Bible, and Persian folktales. Along the way, it teaches the principles of Sufism and interprets the Qur’an.
- In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi explores the themes of spiritual yearning and hope for union with God, returning again and again to the images of passionate love, intoxication, the ocean, and music.

Preserving the Sacred Texts of Islam

- Islam is a large, rich, and diverse religious tradition. It’s important not to judge it by the actions of a vocal, sometimes violent, antimodern, and antipluralistic minority.
- For many centuries, Timbuktu, in the West African nation of Mali, was a center of Islamic scholarship and learning. Prominent families there had preserved thousands of manuscripts of the Qur’an, commentaries, biographies of the Prophet, and prayer books, as well as works on secular subjects, such as astronomy, medicine, and poetry. Most of these manuscripts are in Arabic, with some dating back to the 13th century.
- When rebels and Islamist militias affiliated with al-Qaeda took over Timbuktu in April 2012, they instituted public floggings; banned music, dancing, and soccer; and destroyed the tombs of Sufi saints. Abdel Kader Haidara, the head of a private library, feared for the safety of the ancient manuscripts in the city’s libraries and research institute. He organized his friends and associates to hide away some 300,000 manuscripts to protect them from the Islamists.
- In January 2013, Timbuktu was retaken by a coalition of government and French troops, and retreating Islamists trashed the libraries and burned whatever they could find. Although it’s true that this destruction was carried out by Muslims, it’s also true

that it was Muslims who created the manuscripts in the first place, preserved them for centuries, and risked their lives to save them.

Suggested Reading

Attar, *Farid ad-Din 'Attar's Memorial of God's Friends*.

———, *The Conference of the Birds*.

Brown, *Hadith*.

Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith*.

Calder, Mohaddedi, and Rippin, eds. and trans., *Classical Islam*.

Dreazen, “The Brazen Bibliophiles of
Timbuktu.”

Jamal, ed. and trans., *Islamic Mystical Poetry*.

Rumi, *The Masnavi, Book One*.

Ruthven, *Islam in the World*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why are the Hadith—traditions about the life of Muhammad—considered authoritative but not scriptural by Muslims?
2. How does Sufism make room for alternative forms of religiosity in Islam, and why was that important in the spread of the faith?

Related Traditions—Baha’i Scriptures

Lecture 33

In choosing which sacred texts to explore, we’ve looked at religions with at least 2 million or so believers, religions that have continued through several generations and expanded beyond their native borders, and scriptures that have been translated into foreign languages. The most recent additions to the library of scriptures we have considered are from 19th-century religions, including Mormonism and Tenrikyo. What might be the next faith traditions that would meet our criteria for study of their sacred texts? Candidates include Scientology, the Unification Church, Falun Gong, and Cao Dai. In this lecture, however, we’ll look at the Baha’i faith, the second most widespread religion in the world after Christianity in terms of its presence in different nations.

Background to the Baha’i Faith

- The Baha’i faith began in 1863, when Baha’u’llah (1817–1892) announced in Bagdad that he was the prophetic fulfillment of Babism, a 19th-century offshoot of Shia Islam.
- Shia is one of the two major divisions of Islam, and Shia Muslims believe that the leadership of the faith should have stayed within the family of Muhammad. Most Shia came to accept a succession of 12 legitimate imams, or divinely appointed leaders, from the 7th to the 9th centuries.
 - The 12th imam was thought to have to have been hidden by God and will return someday as the Mahdi (the “Guided One”), along with Jesus, to usher in the messianic age of peace, justice, and Islamic law.
 - Iran is one of the few countries where Shia Muslims are in the majority, and in 1844, Sayyid Ali-Muhammad Shirazi, a 24-year-old Iranian merchant, announced that he was the “Bab,” meaning “The Gate,” an intermediary between believers and the Mahdi.

- Later, he intimated that he was the Mahdi himself. The Bab gained tens of thousands of followers, called Babis, but he also made some powerful enemies and was executed by a government firing squad in 1850.
- Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, who would later take the honorific title of Baha'u'llah ("Glory of God"), was an early follower of the Bab. Along with many other believers, Baha'u'llah was persecuted and imprisoned. In 1852, while he was jailed in a dungeon in Tehran (the famous "Black Pit"), he saw a vision of a maiden of heaven who told him that God had a special mission for him. After Baha'u'llah's release and exile, he became a leader of the Babis.
- In his writings, the Bab had indicated that a future messianic figure was still to come, and in 1863, in the Garden of Ridvan, near Baghdad, Baha'u'llah declared that he was the promised one whose coming was foretold by the Bab. Over the next few years, most Babis became Baha'is, that is, members of the community that regarded Baha'u'llah as the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation and the fulfillment of the messianic expectations of all the world's major religions.
- The Persian and Ottoman empires were not sympathetic to the Baha'i faith, and Baha'u'llah endured a long series of exiles, imprisonment, and house arrests. Shortly before his death in 1892, Baha'u'llah appointed his eldest son, Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), as his successor. The next leader of the Baha'i community was Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), a grandson of Abdu'l-Baha. Since 1963, the highest authority in the faith has been the Universal House of Justice, an elected body of nine members headquartered in Haifa.
- Baha'is believe in the oneness of God, the oneness of religions, and the oneness of humanity. In other words, there is one all-powerful Creator who has spoken to different prophets (or manifestations of God) at various times and places. These messengers represent progressive revelations.

- All the major religions came from the same God, but they can be unified under the teachings of Baha'i. There may be future manifestations of God, as well, but not for at least 1,000 years.
- As the oneness of God and the oneness of religions are recognized, so also there should be a oneness of humanity, with all races and ethnicities being treated equally and seen as part of a great whole. Significantly, men and women should be equal, as well.
- Baha'is regard humanity as progressing and look to a future of increasing peace, justice, and unity.
- The message of Baha'i has not always been well-received, particularly in Iran, the native land of its founders. Although Baha'is consider their faith a distinct world religion, it comes from an Islamic background, much as Buddhism had its origins in Hinduism or Christianity, in Judaism. The Islamic elements of the faith have convinced some that Baha'is are apostate Muslims, and they have sometimes been harshly persecuted; in some countries, they face legal restrictions.

Baha'i Scriptures

- The Baha'i faith, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is very much a text-based religion, though technically, the Baha'i canon is much larger than those of the other three faiths.
 - Baha'is believe that everything written by the Bab and Baha'u'llah should be accepted as revelations from God. In addition, the writings of Abdu'l-Baha are also regarded as scripture, along with his authenticated talks. The works of Shoghi Effendi are inspired interpretations. They are authoritative but not scriptural in the same way as the writings of the three founders. Official communications from the House of Justice are also considered authoritative but not scripture.
 - Because the Bab, Baha'u'llah, and Abdu'l-Baha spent many years in prison or under house arrest, they wrote voluminously.

The Bab's writings would probably fill 50 volumes, while Baha'u'llah is said to have written 100 volumes worth of books, tracts, prayers, and letters (called tablets). Abdu'l-Baha wrote several books and 27,000 letters, perhaps comprising 50 volumes in total. Not all of the writings of the three founders have been edited and translated, and Baha'is today tend to focus on a few particular books.

- The Bab is regarded as the forerunner of Baha'u'llah, much like Elijah or John the Baptist. As a result, his writings are not studied to the same extent as the writings of Baha'u'llah, at least not in English-speaking countries. The Baha'i's Publishing Trust (the faith's official press) has published a single volume of selections from the Bab's writings, though some of his prayers and meditations are still in common use.
- The majority of sacred texts that Baha'is study regularly are from Baha'u'llah. Even before his 1863 announcement at the Garden of Ridvan that he was the Promised One, he was producing works that would later have the status of revelations.
 - Around 1858, he wrote *The Hidden Words*, a collection of 153 wisdom sayings, about half in Arabic and half in Persian. These are spoken by God in the first-person and addressed to humanity in general.
 - Sometime between 1857 and 1863, Baha'u'llah produced *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys*, two short tracts that were written in response to the questions of Sufi mystics. The Seven Valleys represent the journey of the soul toward God, passing through the Valleys of Search, Love, Knowledge, Unity, Contentment, Wonderment, and finally, the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness.
 - The last of the major pre-Rivdan scriptures is the *Kitab-i-Iqan* ("The Book of Certitude"), published in 1862. In this revelation, Baha'u'llah expounds the ideas of the oneness of God, progressive revelation, and the unity of the prophets.

He interprets key passages from the Qur'an, as well as a few from the New Testament, and sets the stage for his declaration at Ridvan by reinterpreting the Qur'anic verse on Muhammad as the seal of the prophets to allow for further messengers or manifestations of God.

- After Baha'u'llah had made public his identity as the Promised One, he continued to write. Probably the most important of the scriptures after 1863 was the Kitab-i-Aqdas ("Most Holy Book"), which sets forth guidelines for the organization and practices of the Baha'i community.
 - In this text, Baha'u'llah appointed his son Abdu'l-Baha as his successor, outlined the future institutions of the guardianship (a position held by Shoghi Effendi) and the Universal House of Justice, and delineated the rules for Baha'is concerning prayer, fasting, houses of worship, pilgrimage, criminals, marriage, inheritance, and scripture.
 - Some of the distinctive customs of Baha'is come from the Most Holy Book, including the rejection of congregational prayers (aside from a prayer for the dead), the requirement that marriages have the consent of parents, the requirement to write a will, the reciting of scripture both morning and evening, and daily obligatory prayer.
- Among the large number of revealed letters (tablets) by Baha'u'llah, the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf is especially noteworthy. This long letter is Baha'u'llah's last major work, written to a fierce opponent of the Baha'is, and it offers a summary of the doctrines Baha'u'llah had been teaching for more than 30 years.
- A thematic compilation by Shoghi Effendi titled *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, first published in 1935, is often the first scripture that Baha'is encounter.
- The scriptural writings of Abdu'l-Baha include a 1908 publication, *Some Answered Questions*, that came out of conversations with

Selections from Baha'i Writings

World Order of Baha'u'llah (pp. xi–xii):

The Baha'i Faith recognizes the unity of God and of His Prophets, upholds the principle of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all forms of superstition and prejudice, teaches that the fundamental purpose of religion is to promote concord and harmony, that it must go hand-in-hand with science, and that it constitutes the sole and ultimate basis of a peaceful, an ordered and progressive society. It inculcates the principle of equal opportunity, rights and privileges for both sexes, advocates compulsory education, abolishes extremes of poverty and wealth, exalts work performed in the spirit of service to the rank of worship, recommends the adoption of an auxiliary international language, and provides the necessary agencies for the establishment and safeguarding of a permanent and universal peace.

The Hidden Words, #34:

O Dwellers of My Paradise! With the hands of loving-kindness I have planted in the holy garden of paradise the young tree of your love and friendship, and have watered it with the goodly showers of My tender grace.

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah:

Consider the past. How many, both high and low, have, at all times, yearningly awaited the advent of the Manifestations of God in the sanctified persons of His chosen Ones. How often have they expected His coming, how frequently have they prayed that the breeze of Divine mercy might blow, and the promised Beauty step forth from behind the veil of concealment, and be made manifest to all the world.

Short obligatory prayer:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is no other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been.

Laura Clifford Barney. In this book, Abdu'l-Baha offers Baha'i perspectives on a number of issues in which Christians and other Westerners might be interested, including Jesus, baptism, life after death, and the Bible.

Baha'i Prayers

- One final scriptural text that is used extensively by Baha'is is a collection of prayers written by the Bab, Baha'u'llah, and Abdu'l-Baha. These lovely meditations are arranged by topic; for example, there are prayers for divine aid and for one's children, families, forgiveness, healing, marriage, praise and gratitude, protection, and unity. The volume begins with the three possible daily prayers. Believers between the ages of 15 and 70 must recite one each day, though they may choose among the short, medium, or long prayers.
- As an example of how Baha'i sacred texts might enrich and deepen one's spiritual life, we can turn to Robert Hayden, who grew up in a Detroit ghetto and, in 1976, became the first African American poet laureate of the United States. He first encountered the Baha'i faith in graduate school and converted in 1943.
 - Allusions to the revelation of Baha'i appear throughout his work, from the early poem "Baha'u'llah in the Garden of Ridwan," in which he imagines the prophet's state of mind at the time he declared that he was the manifestation of God, to "The Prisoners," based on Hayden's efforts to share Baha'i teaching with the inmates of Jackson State Prison in Michigan.
 - Hayden's "Words in the Mourning Time," written at a difficult period in American history, laments the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, as well as the horrors of the Vietnam War. In the 10th section, the poet looks forward to a future of joy and peace promised in the revelation to Baha'u'llah.

Suggested Reading

Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*.

Baha'i Prayers.

Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*.

———, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*.

———, *Writings of Baha'u'llah*.

Hatcher and Martin, *The Baha'i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*.

Momen, *The Baha'i Faith: A Beginner's Guide*.

Smith, *An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*.

Questions to Consider

1. How might a new religion bring together all religions?
2. If all the voluminous writings of the two founders of Baha'i are considered sacred texts, what determines which ones receive the most attention within the faith?

Abandoned Scriptures—Egyptian and Mayan

Lecture 34

We've now completed our basic tour of the sacred texts of the world's major living religions, but this by no means exhausts the category of sacred texts. A vast number of scriptures have been left behind in the development of religious traditions—sacred texts that still exist today but are no longer connected to any contemporary faith communities. It's interesting to consider how we interpret the stories from these texts with no commentaries, no records of social practices, and no one living who still holds to the values of these faiths. In this lecture, we'll look at two such scriptures: the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Mayan Popol Vuh.

Is the Book of the Dead Scripture?

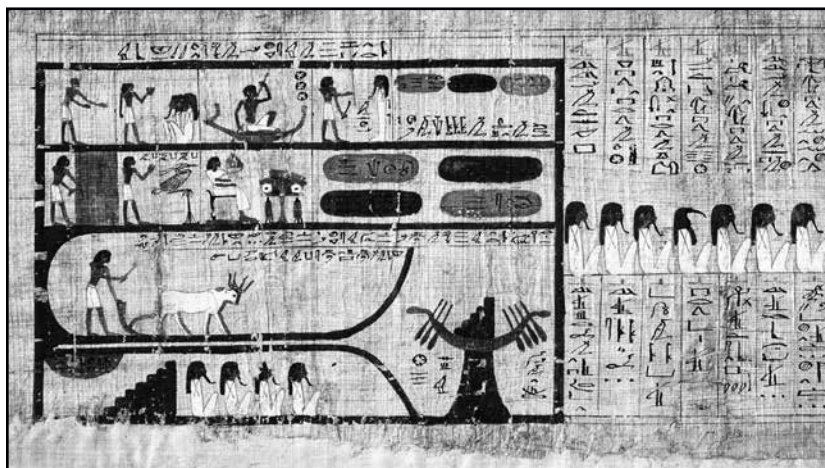
- When Napoleon's army invaded Egypt in 1798, no one could read ancient Egyptian; indeed, all knowledge of the language had been lost since the 5th century C.E. One of the French soldiers discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799, which had the same text written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic (a simplified Egyptian script), and Classical Greek. This triple text was the key that ultimately enabled scholars to read ancient Egyptian.
- The decipherment of hieroglyphs was an astonishing scholarly triumph, and archaeologists started reading whatever they could find. Many of the texts they discovered had to do with religion, including funerary texts, hymns, ritual texts, and magical texts. One text that was commonly buried with mummies was what we today call the Book of the Dead, though for Egyptians it was the "Book of Coming Forth by Day."
- The text is clearly religious in nature, consisting of spells that would bring about the resurrection of the deceased and guide his or her journey through the underworld to a happy afterlife. But does it count as a sacred text?

- Not all religious writings are scripture. Think, for example, of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, or the *Book of Common Prayer*. These books are seriously religious, well-respected, and loved by many, but they are not scripture. Was the Egyptian Book of the Dead more like Dante or more like the Bible?
- One of the insights of modern religious studies is that the concept of "scripture" is relational. As the religion scholar William Graham has noted: "No text, written, oral or both, is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community. A text is only 'scripture' insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing."
- We often think of scriptures as containing revelations, sacred narratives, commandments, and doctrines, but in this course, we have seen examples of sacred texts that consist mostly of poetry or are primarily collections of sayings. Could a book of magical spells be considered scripture? It depends on how it is regarded or used by believers. But again, there is no contemporary community that still mummifies its dead or believes in the Egyptian gods; thus, we must piece together the evidence from archaeology.
- The Book of the Dead was obviously a popular work, given that several thousand copies have survived from the 15th through the 1st centuries B.C.E. Around 600 B.C.E., a standard edition emerged, with 192 spells in a set order. Clearly, people wanted to be buried with the Book of the Dead because repeating its words gave them power over gods and protection from specific dangers in their journey through the Other World.
- Western awareness of the Book of the Dead came about the same time as Max Müller's Sacred Books of the East series. A German translation of one particular copy was done in 1842, and in 1886,

the Swiss scholar Édouard Naville published his three-volume Egyptian edition that compared several manuscripts. In 1895, E. A. Wallis Budge published his famous version, which featured a transcription of the Egyptian hieroglyphs with an interlinear English translation running beneath.

Contents of the Book of the Dead

- The Book of the Dead contains magical formulas for preserving the body from snakes or decay, for not having one's heart or head taken away in the realm of the dead, and for reviving one's mummy, thereby enabling it to eat, drink, and breathe.
- Throughout the text, there is an emphasis on knowing the names of various divinities in order to have power over them; traveling with Re, the sun god, over the expanse of the sky; and transforming oneself into animals and even into gods. Some of the spells are as short as a few sentences, while others extend to several pages.
- One of the lengthier spells that has received a great deal of attention is 125, which describes the judgment of the dead. The primary



Before about 600 B.C.E., copies of the Book of the Dead seem to have been individualized, with variations in the spells and illustrations selected.

illustration shows the weighing of the deceased person's heart in a balance against *maat*, the principle of truth, morality, and justice, represented by an ostrich feather.

- The lists of sins and crimes in the spell (“I have not stolen,” “I have not slain sacred cattle”) provide a synopsis of commonly accepted moral principles in ancient Egypt. But did Egyptians really strive to live by these principles?
- On the one hand, the text is a spell, implying that by saying the right words at the right time, one can escape the consequences of sin.
- On the other hand, spell 17 promises protection and blessings for anyone who reads at least part of the Book of the Dead daily, long before they are face to face with the gods. Perhaps the Book of the Dead was meant to constrain behavior in this life after all.
- For living religious traditions, reading sacred texts can help us better understand the actions and thinking of believers around the world, and there's always the possibility of conversion. But that's not the case with lost traditions. Why, then, might we care about abandoned sacred texts?
 - First, the Book of the Dead has great historical value. Ancient Egypt was a fascinating culture, and the Book of the Dead reveals much about religious beliefs and practices of the time.
 - Second, the text may tell us not just about Egyptians but about humanity in general. Other people in different lands and eras have had similar hopes and fears about death and have wondered about the influence of gods and morality. A faith in the magical power of words, especially if pronounced at the right time and place, is something that we have seen in many of the world's sacred texts.
 - Third, reading the Book of the Dead gives us a chance to reflect on our own religiosity. Are my prayers ever attempts

to get God to do my bidding? Do I think that I can somehow escape the consequences of my mistakes by saying the right words? How much of my good behavior is done for the sake of a pleasant afterlife?

The Popol Vuh

- We have all seen images of magnificent ruins in Mesoamerica that were constructed by the Maya people in the period from 250 to 900 C.E. For unknown reasons, the civilization went into serious decline in the 9th century. Cities were abandoned, political structures collapsed, and the writing system was neglected, although Mayans still existed when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century.
- The Maya produced books, now called codices, that were made of bark paper folded accordion-style, with hieroglyphs and detailed illustrations on both sides. Unfortunately, zealous Catholic priests burned as many codices as they could find, and only a few have survived, which means that we know much less about ancient Mesoamerican civilization than ancient Egypt.
- One codex, now lost, contained sacred stories of the Maya. Sometime between 1554 and 1558, an unnamed Indian rewrote that text into Quiché, a late form of the Mayan language, which he transcribed into the Roman alphabet. Sometime around 1701 to 1703, a Dominican friar, Father Francisco Ximénez, found that Quiché text and translated it into Spanish.
 - Ximénez's manuscript was discovered in 1854 by two European scholars visiting Guatemala City. Upon their return home, one published Ximénez's translation, and the other published the Quiché version with a French translation.
 - The French scholar had also stolen the manuscript itself, which eventually made its way to the Newberry Library in Chicago, where it was rediscovered once again in 1928 and finally published in English in 1950.

- The Popol Vuh (“Council Book”) recounts the origins of the world, the creation of animals and humans, the adventures of two sets of twins, the discovery of corn and fire, and a history of the Quiché branch of the Maya. It also includes guidelines for religious ritual and divination. The episodes are not related in strictly chronological order, and there is a great deal of doubling of characters, events, and phrasing.
 - The most famous stories are of the hero-twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Their father and uncle, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu (also twins), were celebrated players of the Mesoamerican ballgame.
 - The twins are clever tricksters, who manage to defeat the gods of the underworld; afterward, they ascended into the sky to become the sun and the moon.
 - The Popol Vuh continues with a lengthy account of the creation of humans and the history of the Quiché Maya, then concludes: “Everything has been completed here concerning Quiché.”
- We don’t know whether the Popol Vuh was ever an authoritative text or how believers used it. However, the strange narratives in the text are clearly connected to the world of the Yucatan Peninsula; they mention calabash trees, chili peppers, and monkeys, as well as such customs as the ballgame and human sacrifice. And there may be more here than meets the eye. Some scholars have suggested that astronomical information is encoded in the progress of the hero-twins through the underworld and in other episodes.
- As with the Book of the Dead, the Popol Vuh may contain some wise insights or universal truths, and it certainly offers a chance to reflect on the religious assumptions of our own culture. But the Mesoamerican text also has stories that can be analyzed in terms of plot, character, and theme and may have interesting things to say about human relationships, life and death, or the connection between the human and natural worlds.

- All sacred texts, even abandoned ones, deserve an extra measure of respect simply because so many people have held them in high esteem. They have often been primary elements in how individuals viewed themselves and the world, yet they can be puzzling. This leads us to one last reason to read them today: as a reminder of the incredible variety of human religious experience and a warning about how much we still don't know.

Suggested Reading

Christenson, trans., *Popol Vu: Literal Poetic Version*.

Faulkner, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

Graham, "Scripture."

Johnston, ed., *Religions of the Ancient World*.

Kemp, *How to Read the Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

Taylor, ed., *Journey through the Afterlife*.

Tedlock, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*.

Questions to Consider

1. How might we approach sacred texts for which there is no longer a living faith community?
2. Why is there such variety in sacred texts, with some primarily telling stories and explaining things and others providing liturgy by which the world or individuals are transformed?

Secular Scripture—U.S. Constitution

Lecture 35

In the last two lectures, we've speculated about which new religious writings are most likely to become part of the library of world scriptures in the future, and we've discussed sacred texts that are no longer supported by a faith community. In this lecture, we'll continue to test our assumptions about sacred texts by turning the topic on its head: If it is really true that sacred texts are defined less by their specific contents than by the role they play in the lives of believers, is it possible to have writings that are basically secular in nature yet are treated as if they were scripture? Our test case will be the Constitution of the United States.

Informative Uses of Sacred Texts

- For a volume titled *Rethinking Scripture*, Miriam Levering used her fieldwork with Chinese Buddhist nuns to categorize different ways that scripture is received and used by believers, and she did so with an eye to comparative studies that might take into account different notions of the origins or contents of sacred texts. Levering outlined four “modes of reception”: informative, transactive, transformative, and symbolic.
- In the informative mode, it's the ideas within the text that matter most. You will recall that the Mahayana canon is very large, and it is possible to devote one's entire life to mastering just a portion of its contents. Some Buddhist nuns feel called to this work.
- In contrast, the Constitution is not long, yet thousands of people have also spent their lives analyzing, debating, and writing about every phrase it contains. Such efforts are justified because the words matter; they can spell the difference between retaining or losing property, exercising or being denied political rights, and more. The Constitution is a binding document that regulates not only the government but also the day-to-day lives of American citizens.

- There is obviously much more law than just the Constitution, but the Constitution holds a fundamental, paramount position. Other significant legal and historical sources may have second- or third-tier status. For example, we might consider the 85 Federalist papers as something akin to the Muslim Hadith—not exactly scripture in the same way as the Qur’an but still a respected, authoritative source for its interpretation.
- Unlike most diverse religious traditions, there is a final authority to determine the meaning of the Constitution: the Supreme Court. Since 1790, the court has issued more than 30,000 opinions, and these, in turn, have been studied, cited, and argued about as binding documents. In another parallel with sacred texts discussed earlier in this course, the Supreme Court, like the Jewish Talmud, records and preserves its dissenting opinions.

Transactive Uses of Sacred Texts

- The second of the four modes sketched out by Levering is the transactive, which uses a text to make something happen. Levering describes how Buddhist nuns use the sutras in rituals intended for specific purposes, such as “to create merit” or “to offer devotion and praise.” With regard to the Constitution, legal professionals depend on it to make law, of course, but it is also used by the rest of us, particularly in ritual or ceremonial situations.
- The Declaration of Independence is more likely to be recited than the Constitution, particularly on the Fourth of July, a holiday created to honor its signing. On that day, students, politicians, and ordinary citizens often read the Declaration aloud at ceremonies or other gatherings. Our dispute with Britain has long since been resolved, but is it true that the words of the Declaration no longer matter?
 - One sentence from the second paragraph may be the most important statement in American political culture: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

- From one perspective, the notion that all men are created equal is manifestly false, yet there is also a sense that these lines represent our highest values and aspirations: Everyone should be equal in dignity and worth and equal before the law. Intoning these words aloud, in public, has the effect of reinforcing our commitment to making our nation such a place.
- The Constitution is also used in ceremonial contexts. Every year, about half a million people from around the world fulfill the qualifications to become U.S. citizens. As part of the naturalization ceremony, they take an oath that they will “support and defend the Constitution,” similar to oaths taken by the president on inauguration day and members of the armed forces when they enlist.
- Many people can recite the preamble to the Constitution; they may know the wording of the First or Second Amendments by heart; and September 17—the day the Constitution was signed in 1787—is a national holiday. The Constitution is something that keeps Americans together and binds us to our past, even if we are not intimately familiar with all of its articles and sections.



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Constitution Day, September 17, is commemorated by public schools with speeches, trivia contests, and other activities focused on the U.S. Constitution.

Transformative and Symbolic Uses of Sacred Texts

- Sometimes scriptures are used not to influence one's relationships with others or to change the world but to transform oneself. Levering reports, “As Chinese Buddhists read, listen to, study and comment on sutras in order to become informed by their account of reality, they also seek ... to be transformed in their personal capacity to

experience wisdom and compassion.” Are there times when people look to the founding documents of America as a source of private insight or inspiration or see them as manifestations of larger truths?

- One of the most religious-like facts about the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence is that we treat them as if they were icons or holy relics. Visitors can go to the National Archives in Washington, DC, and see original copies in a large bronze display case under bulletproof glass—similar to a shrine.
- Many famous lines from significant American documents and speeches are carved into monuments and buildings on the National Mall in Washington, including quotations from the Declaration of Independence on the Jefferson Memorial.
 - Those who commissioned the monuments probably had transactive functions in mind, but those of us who walk through to read and reflect may find the experience transformative.
 - Transactive, transformative, and symbolic aspects are combined when we display copies of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution on our walls.

Additional Religious Parallels

- We can point to additional parallels between the founding documents of America and the sacred texts of the world. For example, like the letters of Saint Paul, the Declaration and the Constitution were not written with the idea that they would someday be canonized, yet over time, their stature has grown.
 - In 1816, Jefferson complained, “Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched.” He well knew the arguments, horse-trading, and compromises that went into the creation of the Constitution. Jefferson went on to suggest that constitutions ought to change with the times.
 - However, as early as 1796, George Washington included in his Farewell Address a plea that “the Constitution ... be sacredly

maintained.” Although the human origins of the Constitution are well documented, it is the latter impulse that has generally prevailed.

- Like the sacred texts of Confucianism, which were always regarded as the products of human effort, though done by sages, there has long been a temptation in the United States to regard the Founders as men blessed with preternatural wisdom and moral courage. A close look at their biographies and the transcripts of their deliberations quickly dispels assumptions of their near-divinity. Respect is due the oldest written national constitution still in force in the world, along with the men who crafted it, but it didn't arrive immaculately from heaven.
- Another aspect of the Constitution that seems at least quasi-religious is that there are different schools of interpretation, just as there are for the Vedas, the Bible, and the Qur'an. For the Constitution, these interpretive modes include textualism, which analyzes the exact meaning of the words; originalism, which looks to the intentions of those who drafted and ratified its provisions; and living constitutionalism, which prefers to read the document as having a dynamic meaning that can and should change to accommodate social and technological innovations.
- Sanford Levinson has written a fascinating book, *Constitutional Faith*, in which he identifies what he calls Protestant and Catholic strains in constitutional interpretation. This distinction may remind us of arguments over Protestant bias that we noted earlier. Some legal scholars and judges are more interested in origins than in developments, in the critical-historical analysis of the text rather than in later traditions, or in the legitimacy of individual as opposed to institutional determinations of meaning.
- Perhaps one reason that America has a text-based government is that it was largely settled by Protestants. Just as it seemed natural to them to look to a single volume of holy writ as the basis for religion, so also a government might have as its foundation a

revered, authoritative political document. Further, America has always been something of an experiment—a nation created by a set of documents rather than a shared ethnicity, religion, or longstanding ties to the land. It's not surprising that we regard our secular writings with almost religious-like devotion.

- Scholars have long debated the idea of “civil religion,” but some have now begun to talk about “constitutional idolatry,” wondering if we have gone too far in our deference to an 18th-century document that is in some ways undemocratic, giving disproportionate political power to small states, rural districts, and the wealthy, and that sets up a divided form of government that has generally failed elsewhere in the world. “Idolatry” is a strong word, but it's hard to imagine other political documents around the world being treated in the same way that Americans revere the Declaration and the Constitution.
- The Constitution, unlike most sacred texts, does not regard itself as having final authority but includes provisions for updating and amendments.
 - Consequently, we end up with a document that resembles the Qur'an, in which some verses are thought to have been abrogated by later revelations, or the Bible, in which the New Testament explicitly rejects the requirements of the Law of Moses. Thus, the Constitution is not a closed canon.
 - Indeed, it's worth thinking about an even larger secular canon that might include Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Patrick Henry's “Give me liberty or give me death” speech, the Seneca Falls “Declaration of Sentiments,” and others.
- A final piece of evidence about the equivalence of secular and religious sacred texts can be found in Martin Luther King's “I have a dream” speech. One of the characteristics of sacred texts is that they often draw on earlier scriptures, and it is telling that King quotes from the Bible and the Declaration of Independence in much

the same way: He treats both as unfulfilled promises of better days to come.

Suggested Reading

Kammen, ed., *The Origins of the American Constitution*.

Levering, "Scripture and Its Reception."

Levinson, *Constitutional Faith*.

Meier, *American Scripture*.

Rakov, ed., *The Annotated U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence*.

Ravitch, and Thernstrom, eds., *The Democracy Reader*.

Questions to Consider

1. If texts are made sacred in relationship to a community, is it possible for basically secular texts to have scripture-like functions within a nation? Is there such a thing as "civic religion"?
2. What American political texts are most likely to be memorized, recited on holidays, or even carved in stone?

Heavenly Books, Earthly Connections

Lecture 36

As we come to the end of this course, it might be useful to spend some time answering two questions: Where do we go from here, and what difference might the comparative study of scripture make in our lives? The first half of this lecture answers the first question by offering recommended readings for each of the major religious traditions we've studied. The second part of the lecture attempts to answer the second question by returning to the reasons we listed in Lecture 1 for studying other people's scriptures. In particular, we'll discuss how reading world scripture can help us better understand the lives of others and perhaps even provide greater insight into our own intellectual and spiritual commitments.

Readings from Early Religions

- If you read only one text from Hinduism, it should be the Bhagavad Gita. You might also try the Isha and Katha Upanishads, which provide a good introduction to Vedic literature.
- For Judaism, you might try something from each of the three sections of the Tanakh. From the Torah, you might sample Genesis, which includes some of the most famous stories in the Hebrew Bible. From the Prophets, read 2 Isaiah (chapters 40–55), which most scholars date to the 6th century B.C.E., during the Babylonian Exile. From the Writings, try the brief book of Ruth, a simple yet moving tale of ordinary people and extraordinary kindness.
 - For those from a Christian background, it's worth looking at the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh to see how Jews read their own sacred texts. As you recall, the entire Tanakh is regarded as holy, but the Torah is especially sacred and is read aloud in synagogues over the course of a year.
 - Conservative Jews believe that the Torah was revealed by God to Moses, and some assert that it predated the world and was used as a blueprint for creation. Other Jews accept the results

of the historical-critical method and view the Torah, like the Prophets and the Writings, as the product of many sources edited and revised over centuries.

- Jewish tradition claims that Moses received not only the written Torah at Mount Sinai but also the oral Torah, which was eventually written down in the 3rd century C.E. as the Mishnah, then later expanded into the two Talmuds. If you're interested in exploring this literature, a good place to start is the tractate Aboth ("The Fathers") in the fourth division of the Mishnah. The Aboth is a brief collection of wise sayings and moral maxims from famous rabbis.
- One of the most beloved texts from the Theravada tradition of Buddhism is the Dhammapada, which sets forth the basic principles of Buddhist doctrine and morality. The canon of Mahayana Buddhism is vast, but one book considered by many to be the fullest expression of the Buddha's teachings is the Lotus Sutra. Read the first four chapters, which include the parables of the burning house and the prodigal son. From Zen Buddhism, read the *Mumonkan* ("Gateless Gate"), which is a 13th-century collection of 48 koans in the form of brief anecdotes about Zen masters and their students.
- For East Asian religion and philosophy, read the *Analects of Confucius* and the Daodejing. The *Analects* are brief, fairly straightforward sayings of Confucius. The Daodejing was originally an anonymous collection of wisdom sayings that was later attributed to Laozi and eventually elevated to the status of a divine text.

Readings from Common Era Religions

- Recommended readings for Christianity include one of the gospels, perhaps Luke; the book of Acts, which offers a history of the early Christian movement; and something from Paul, either Romans or 1 Corinthians. If you're curious about Christian sacred texts outside the Bible, you might start with the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, which offers 114 short sayings attributed to Jesus.

- As we saw, Muslims view their scripture, the Qur'an, as a miraculous transcript of a heavenly book. It is God's primary revelation to humankind, given to Muhammad with the angel Gabriel as a mediator, and most Muslims believe that the Qur'an is co-eternal with God, uncreated. Thus, for Islam, the choice of which sacred text to read is obvious. But the Qur'an, with its 114 suras, is a bit long.
 - Newcomers might want to start with some of the shorter, earlier, more lyrical revelations toward the end of the volume, then read a few of the longer suras that appear at the beginning (2, "The Cow"; 4, "Women"; and 5, "The Table").
 - If you're coming from a Jewish or Christian background, it might also be interesting to read some of the middle suras that are named after biblical characters: 10, "Jonah"; 12, "Joseph"; 19, "Mary"; or 71, "Noah." And some Muslims feel that sura 112 contains the essence of Islam: "Say: He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him."
 - If you're interested in the Hadith, or traditions about the Prophet, the best place to begin is with Al-Nawawi's 13th-century collection *Forty Hadith*, which has long been the most popular introductory anthology of Hadith.
- The Adi Granth is the paramount scripture of Sikhism. As you recall, it's a collection of poetry by the Sikh gurus and some of their Hindu and Muslim predecessors that was designated by the Tenth Guru as the perpetual Guru of the community. Two recommended readings in this tradition are *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*, translated by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, and *Songs of the Saints from the Adi Granth*, translated by Nirmal Dass.
- The best avenue into the scriptures of the Latter-day Saints is, of course, the Book of Mormon, which was thought to have been miraculously translated from ancient gold plates that were given to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni. Two recommendations here are

3 Nephi, which tells the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to people in the Americas, and 1 Nephi, which gives a good sense of the narrative and characteristic themes of the book.

- Finally, if you're curious about Baha'i, start with *The Hidden Words*—a collection of mystical sayings by Baha'u'llah. In addition, many have found the book *Some Answered Questions* to be a clear introduction to Baha'i teachings.
- In addition to reading some of the scriptures from this course, go on the Internet and look for examples of sacred texts in use, perhaps Vedic ceremonies, Buddhist sutra chanting, Qur'anic recitations, or the singing of the Adi Granth in a Sikh temple. Even better, try to attend a worship service of a religion that is not your own.

Concluding Our Study

- In our first lecture, we noted several good reasons to read other people's scriptures: they're easily accessible; they're usually central to the faith tradition; they lend themselves to comparative study; they can be sources of wisdom, beauty, and awe; and they help us better understand the lives of others and perhaps even provide greater insight into our own intellectual and spiritual commitments.
- People often argue about religion, and scripture can sometimes be used as a weapon or a wedge, particularly because many sacred texts make strong, mutually exclusive claims about God, reality, and salvation. Yet reading scripture can also be a bridge between people with different ideas about God and reality. A sacred text may or may not contain the truth about unseen forces or other realms of existence, but it most certainly contains truths about millions of believers who have accepted the text as authoritative.
- If you want to understand what's going on in the Middle East or in much of Africa, you need to read the Qur'an; many of the basic values of China and Japan will not make sense until you've considered the Confucian *Analects* and the Daodejing; and it's impossible to grasp American politics and culture without a basic

knowledge of the Bible. Reading sacred texts provides in-depth knowledge and takes you into the heart of various traditions.

- If you come from the background of a particular faith, it can be disconcerting or even threatening to realize that other people believe different things with just as much sincerity as you do and that from a certain perspective, all religions seem rather implausible. But it's possible to remain true to one's own faith tradition while acknowledging the good in others.
- Many people nowadays say that they are spiritual but not religious, perhaps because they are wary of the track record of religious institutions. This might lead some to pick and choose passages from the sacred texts of the world to create a unique, personalized faith. However, as personally satisfying as a few random verses might be, it is still important to read sacred texts in the context of their own traditions. Taking sacred texts seriously means appreciating their



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The Scriptural Reasoning movement recognizes that Christians, Jews, and Muslims may become aware of deep differences as they study one another's texts.

role in communities that provide support and solace but also make demands on believers.

- In the 1990s, Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia and David Ford at Cambridge began the Scriptural Reasoning movement, which encourages small groups of believers from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to get together and read passages from their sacred texts. The point isn't to disparage or convert but to understand and learn from one another. The model for interactions is hospitality—to be a gracious host when inviting outsiders to comment upon one's own scriptures and an attentive guest when listening to insiders share their sacred texts.
- Scriptural Reasoning brings together adherents of the three Abrahamic religions, but an even broader vision of religious dialogue has been presented by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists. In his book *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, he explores similarities and differences among Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, with constant attention to sacred texts.
 - The Dalai Lama observes that an acceptance of religious pluralism does not necessarily undermine claims of exclusive truth. Even if all the major religions can't be equally true, they can nevertheless be equally legitimate; they are worthy of respect because we can imagine why intelligent, moral people might choose to believe, even if we ourselves don't share that belief.
 - It seems true that reading other people's sacred texts with empathy and understanding can make the world a better place. There will always be differences between religions that matter a great deal, but as we come to better understand and perhaps even admire those of different faith traditions, we can marvel at the religious diversity in the world and what those many traditions and scriptures mean in the human experience.

Suggested Reading

Gyatso, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*.

Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom."

Smith, *What Is Scripture?*

Questions to Consider

1. Which sacred texts are most likely to reward reading by outsiders?
2. How can reading other people's scriptures lead to greater harmony and understanding in the world?
3. What difference might the comparative study of sacred texts make in our lives?

Recommended Texts and Translations

Hinduism

Flood, Gavin, and Charles Martin, trans. *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.

Miller, Barbara Stoler, trans. *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. New York: Bantam, 1986.

Olivelle, Patrick, trans. *Upanisads*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Patton, Laurie L., trans. *The Bhagavad Gita*. London: Penguin, 2008.

Roebuck, Valerie J., trans. *The Upanishads*. London: Penguin, 2003.

Judaism

Danby, Herbert, trans. *The Mishnah*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.

Neusner, Jacob, trans. *The Mishnah: A New Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Note on the Bible: The New American Bible (Catholic), the New International Version (evangelical), the New Jerusalem Bible (Catholic), and the Revised English Bible (ecumenical) are all good translations, though the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is the most ecumenical and also the widely used version in academia. If you're new to the Bible, the NRSV is recommended. For the Hebrew Bible, be sure to take a look at the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh.

Buddhism

Carter, John Ross, and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans. *The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hurvitz, Leon, trans. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sutra)*. Rev. ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Roebuck, Valerie J., trans. *The Dhammapada*. London: Penguin, 2010.

Sekida, Katsuki, trans. and commentator, and A. V. Grimstone, ed. *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*. New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1977.

Shibayama, Zenkei. *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*. Translated by Sumiko Kudo. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Watson, Burton, trans. *The Lotus Sutra*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

East Asian Religions

Dawson, Raymond. *Confucius: The Analects*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Ivanhoe, Philip J., trans. *The Daodejing of Laozi*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002.

Lau, D. C., trans. *Confucius: The Analects*. London: Penguin, 1979.

———, trans. *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*. London: Penguin, 1963.

Leys, Simon, trans. *The Analects of Confucius*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Mair, Victor H., trans. *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*. New York: Bantam, 1990.

Christianity

“The Gospel of Thomas.” In *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, edited by Bart D. Ehrman, pp. 19–28. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Note on the Bible: The New American Bible (Catholic), the New International Version (evangelical), the New Jerusalem Bible (Catholic), and the Revised English Bible (ecumenical) are all good translations, though the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is the most ecumenical and also the widely used version in academia. If you're new to the Bible, the NRSV is recommended.

Islam

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S., trans. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Ali, Maulana Muhammad, trans. *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary*. 7th rev. ed. Lahore: Ahamadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 2002.

———, trans. *A Manual of Hadith*. 2nd ed. Lahore: Ahamadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1990.

Ibrahim, Ezzeddin, and Denys Johnson-Davies, trans. *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997.

Khalidi, Tarif, trans. *The Qur'an*. New York: Penguin, 2008.

Newer Religions

Abdu'l-Baha. *Some Answered Questions*. Translated by Laura Clifford Barney. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990.

Baha'u'llah. *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2003.

Dass, Nirmal, trans. *Songs of the Saints from the Adi Granth*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Hardy, Grant, ed. *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, trans. *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995.

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Alexander, Philip S., ed. and trans. *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Ali, Maulana Muhammad, trans. *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary*. 7th rev. ed. Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 2002.

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Armstrong, Karen. *The Bible: A Biography*. New York: Grove Press, 2007.

Aston, William George, trans. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*. 2 vols. London: Kegan Paul and Japan Society of London, 1896.

Attar, Farid Ud-Din. *Conference of the Birds*. Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. London: Penguin, 1984.

———. *Farid ad-Din 'Atar's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*. Translated by Paul Losensky. New York: Paulist Press, 2009.

Attridge, Harold W. ed. *Harper Collins Study Bible*. Rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. (Includes the New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocrypha.)

Baha'i Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Baha'u'llah, the Bab, and Abdu'l-Baha. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991.

Baha'u'llah. *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976.

———. *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1992.

———. *Writings of Baha'u'llah: A Compilation*. Rev. ed. New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1994.

Barlow, Philip. *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Barton, Stephen C., ed. *Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. (Includes the JPS Tanakh translation.)

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Bock, Felicia Gressitt, trans. *Engi-Shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era*. Books I–X. 2 vols. Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970–1972.

Bokenkamp, Stephen R. *Early Daoist Scriptures*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Bokser, Ben Zion, ed. and trans. *The Talmud: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

Bowman, Matthew. *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*. New York: Random House, 2012.

Boyce, Mary, ed. and trans. *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

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Breen, John, and Mark Teeuwen. *A New History of Shinto*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Brettler, Marc Zvi. *How to Read the Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005.

Brettler, Marc Zvi, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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